Human Decapitation in Ancient Mesoamerica

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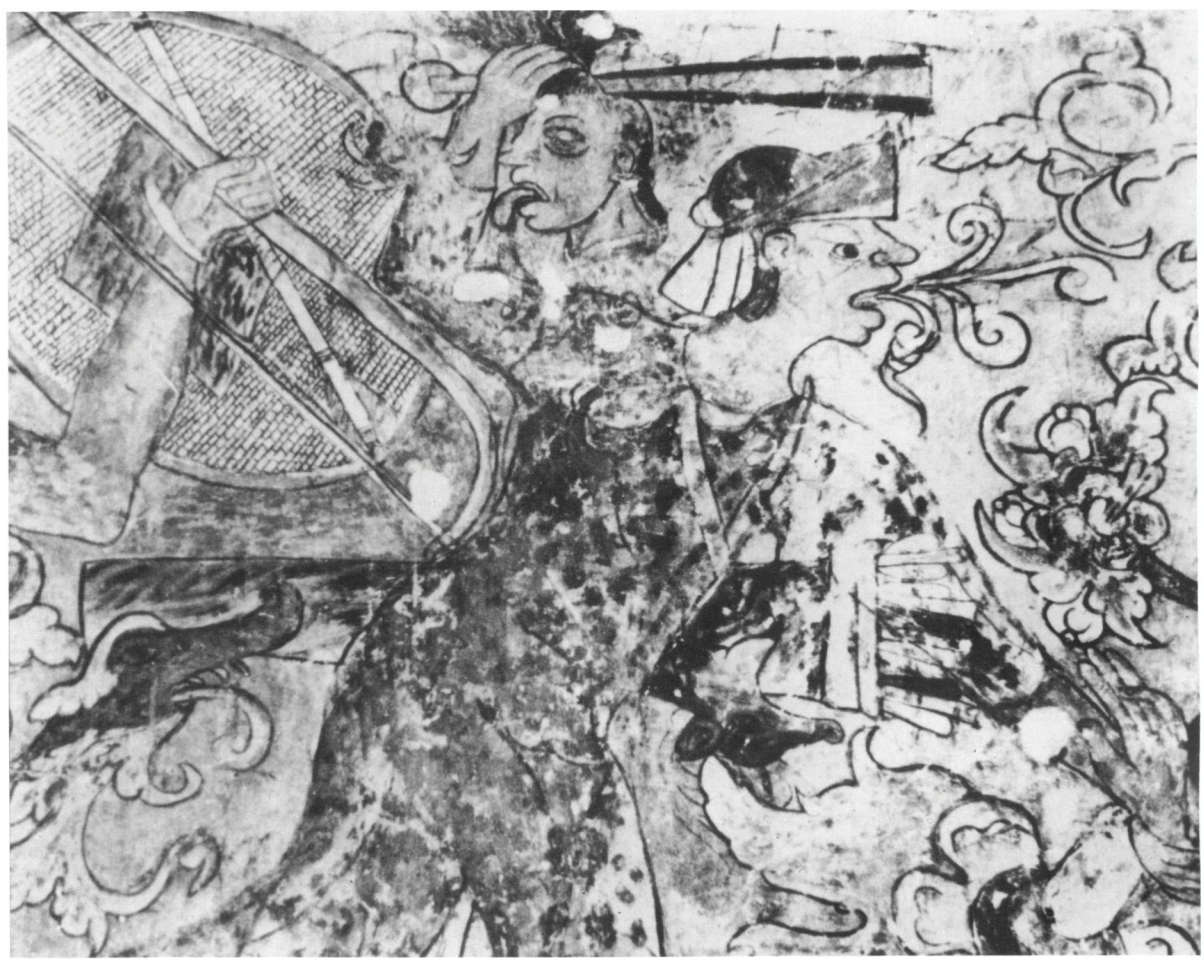


Frontispiece Tiger Knight with severed head and *macana* in the 17th-century murals of the Ixmiquilpan Monastery, Hidalgo, Mexico. Photograph by Sam Ball.

HUMAN DECAPITATION IN ANCIENT MESOAMERICA

Cultural anthropologists have recognized for some time that human beings around the world have certain basic living patterns and complexes of thought, beliefs, and actions in common because of the physical limitations of human body structure, its needs and functions. The concept that the head, the heart, and/or other body parts contain certain physical/psychic powers of the owner that can be transmitted to another person when those parts are consumed or preserved is a very widespread cultural phenomenon. The nearly worldwide occurrence of this concept cannot be simply explained other than by assuming that several distinct and independent processes of logical thought have been carried to similar conclusions. Many wide-ranging examples could be cited to demonstrate this, but their description lies outside the scope of this paper. In the way of two examples, however, there are the Asmat of Dutch New Guinea, where a man must kill a member of another village or territory in order to obtain a trophy head and thereby a name for his offspring (Zegwaard 1959:1022), and the Upper Amazon Jívaro who take heads in similar raids, shrinking them for preservation as trophies and indicators of strength and power (Up de Graff 1923:272-83). To argue that such similarities are the result of contact or diffusion is to overlook the logic of limited possibilities and requires that other obvious cultural differences be suppressed or ignored.

Paul Kirchhoff (1943:106), in his table of cultural elements of ancient Mesoamerica, includes both the taking of head trophies and cannibalism, but he neither elaborates on these traits nor attempts to relate them to other cultural elements, temporal periods, or cultural regions.

To judge from what was recorded of pre-Columbian Mexican beliefs, victims imparted their own personal vitality, as well as that of the god they often represented, prior to their sacrifice. One who consumed the victim's flesh or preserved his head or skull therefore endowed himself with special human abilities as well as certain qualities of the deity. While much attention has been paid to Mesoamerican concepts surrounding heart and arrow sacrifice and the use of flayed human skins in the Xipe rites, only limited attention has been paid to the full scope and importance of decapitation, head shrinking, and trophy heads in ancient Mesoamerica. Decapitation, from all evidence, seems to have been an integral part of indigenous ceremonial life, warfare, and personal achievement from a considerably early era and throughout most of Mexico and Central America.

For the purposes of this paper I have employed seven conditions or criteria that will determine the representation or depiction of decapitation in pre-Columbian pictorial codices, figurines, and stone carvings. These are: 1) a head or skull in any position with blood flowing from the neck; 2) a head held by the hair and lacking a body; 3) heads hung upside down, suspended by a cord through the cheeks, nostrils, etc.; 4) heads attached to poles, staffs, or body adorn-

ments; 5) bodies with severed necks, usually with serpents or blood projecting from the neck; 6) portrayals of the completed or partial act of decapitation; and 7) skull burials that retain the mandible and two or more cervical vertebrae but lack a body. These criteria adequately distinguish all possible examples of decapitation and trophy-taking while eliminating small stone faces, skulls, or figures that often adorn parts of the costumes worn by nobles, priests, and warriors. Carved human skulls do not in themselves denote decapitation but will be considered as head trophies. Small human heads with affixed day signs or names are frequently used in pictorial documents and stone carvings to connect that individual to a town or maize field, or to give other informative data. These cannot be considered pertinent to this study. Borderline cases, such as the ceramic effigy-heads of the Mixteca Baja, will be discussed individually within the context of this paper.

HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

Actual accounts or descriptions of activities related to the head complex from the early contact period are relatively rare and often obscure. Writing of the events of the Conquest, Bernal Díaz del Castillo (1956:352) mentions that, in an unnamed pueblo subject to Texcoco, Gonzalo de Sandoval found "two faces which had been flayed, and the skin tanned like skin for gloves, the beards were left on, and they had been placed as offerings upon one of the altars. There were also found four tanned skins of horses very well prepared. . . ." Later, during the siege of Tenochtitlan, he remarks (*ibid.*: 436) that they "flayed the skin off the faces, and prepared it afterwards like glove leather . . . and kept those for the festivals when they celebrated drunken orgies. . . ." This would appear to be a direct reference to the Xipe Totec cult.

In 1540 or 1541 Fray Toribio de Benavente, better known as Motolinía (1950:76), wrote: "The heads of those whom they sacrificed, especially prisoners of war, were skinned, and if the captives were lords or personages of importance, they skinned the heads, hair and all, and dried them in order to keep them. There were many of these dried heads at first, and, except for the fact that they had some beard, no one would have taken them for anything but the heads of five- or six-year old children. The reason for this was that they were cured and dried."

Futher descriptions of Central Mexican practices involving decapitation and special treatment of the head will be described in more detail along with the discussion on codices. While Motolinía's description appears to be firsthand, those of Sahagún were secondhand recollections gathered over several decades following the Conquest.

By 1578 the Dominican Fray Juan de Córdova had compiled his *Vocabulario Castellano-Zapoteco* for central Oaxaca. Therein we find the following entry (Córdova 1942:63 verso): "Cabeça desollada el cuero lleno cõ que baylauan antiguamente [head flayed, the skin stuffed, with which they danced in former times]. Petihui, pitihui, pitiñequiqueni. . . ." According to Leigh (1961:6), "these archaic Zapotec words mean skin or leather of *his* head" and indicate that "the shrunken head did not become a thing apart from the person who was dead."

At about this time, between 1566 and 1579, Bishop Diego de Landa (Tozzer 1941:131) recorded that the Maya "used to cut off the heads of the old lords of Cocom, when they died, and after cooking them they cleaned off the flesh, and then sawed off half the crown on the back, leaving the front part with the jaws and teeth. Then they replaced the flesh which was gone from these half-skulls by a kind of bitumen, and gave them a perfect appearance characteristic of those whose skulls they were. They kept these

together with the statues with the ashes [Landa is referring to wooden statues with cremated ashes inside], all of which they kept in the oratories of their houses with their idols, holding them in very great reverence and respect."

During the early half of the seventeenth century, Santarén, a Jesuit missionary, described the Acaxee, a mountain tribe of Durango and Sinaloa, as practicing warfare with the object of securing the victims for cannibal feasts. "If the body could not be carried off, the head was severed with a small hatchet carried for the purpose, and borne home in sign of triumph" (Beals 1933:17). The body parts were cooked in *ollas* while they danced carrying the head of the dead man. The bones, cooked clean, were suspended or inserted in the walls of their "strong houses" along with the head. Also the Cora of Nayarit had ceremonial houses called "strong houses" in which they kept the heads of enemies captured in raids or battles (*ibid.*: 17, fn.). Other northern tribes that reportedly practiced head-taking include the Tarahumare, Yaqui, Tepahue, Sinaloa, and the Tepehuanes (Beals 1932:191). Bones and skulls of dead enemies were also used by the Acaxee, along with idols, in planting ceremonies conducted at the foot of a zapote tree (Beals 1933:28). Among the Xixime, a tribe to the south of the Acaxee, the skull and other parts were placed on a pole in the middle of the plaza (Pérez de Ribas 1944, III:93; Beals 1933:33), which is analogous to the skull racks of the Aztecs. These practices of taking the head of the enemies during the battle and later dancing with them is also attributed to a group known as the Tecosquines of southwestern Nayarit in the Relación de Compostela of 1584 (Paso y Troncoso 1947, I:13).

Sahagún's informants described the Huastecans (the Toveiome and Panteca or Cuexteca) of the northern Gulf Coast region as very powerful warriors. "And when one came to overpower his enemy, he cut off his head, casting his body aside. He carried off only his head; he tied it [on a stick]. If he seized four or five in war, he tied on as many heads" (Sahagún 1950-70, XI:185-6). Dahlgren (1953:155) refers to a circum-Caribbean complex that Acosta Saignes (1950) called the Tlacaxipeualiztli complex, which includes heart sacrifices and head trophies. Dahlgren (1953:155) also calls attention to the Huastec practice of curing the heads or stuffing the skins of the victim with straw, corn husk, cotton, or ashes, and then keeping them in the temple or in the house of the cacique.

In the recently restored seventeenth-century murals of the Ixmiquilpan Monastery in the State of Hidalgo, Mexico, there are numerous battle scenes that show Indians (probably local Otomí) in conflict with other Indians and Spaniards. There is a rich amalgamation of European Renaissance mythology with pre-Hispanic ideas and style in these tempera murals executed by native artists for the Augustinian Friar Andres de La Mata. Among the many scenes of sea monsters and fire-breathing dragons there is one quetzal-plumed centaur which has sandaled human feet and wears a severed Spanish head as a trophy hanging from a strap (Edwards 1966:107, Fig. 82; Nye 1968: Fig. 5). At several places in the main frieze Indian warriors, wearing jaguar skins and the insignia of leaders, are shown holding in one hand a *macana* (obsidian-edged sword) and severed head (Frontispiece; Edwards 1966: Figs. 80, 82, 83).

At least two aspects of this concern with the head, decapitation, and trophy heads seem to have been particularly strong at the frontiers of and in the regions adjacent to Mesoamerica. Carved shell gorgets and copper plates of the Southern Cult or Middle Mississippian times (ca. 1400-1600 A.D.) often depict ballplayers and anthropomorphized eagles (eagle warriors ?) holding severed heads (Fig. 1*a-e*; Seler 1902-23, V: 44-51; Phillips 1940:353-67; Willey 1966:304-5).

Human sacrifice took place periodically from Panamá through the Taquaca area in Honduras. Fernandez de Oviedo (1851-55, III: 127) reports that the usual methods consisted in severing the head or slitting the throat. Also the Nicaro displayed heads on trees in front of their

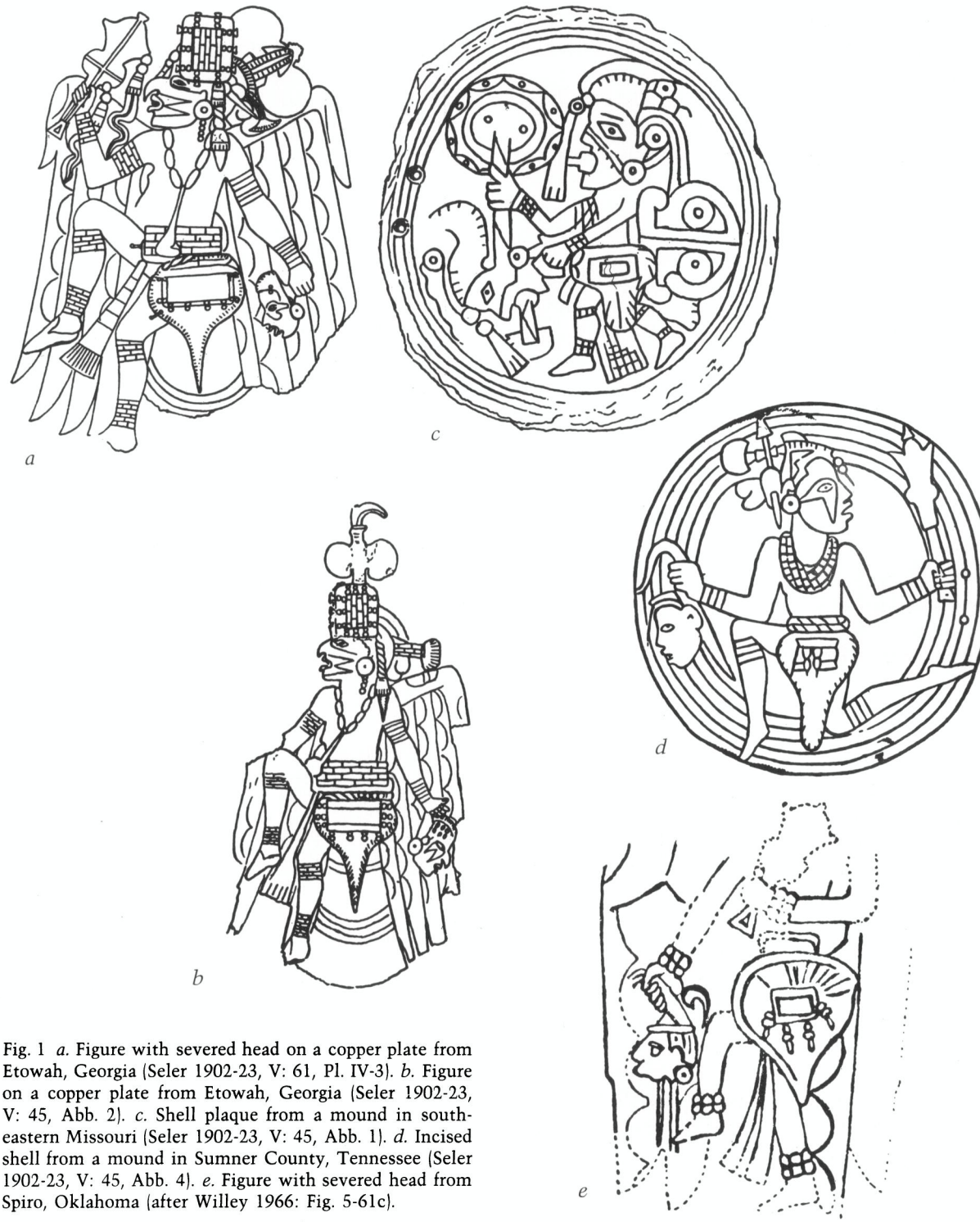


Fig. 1 *a.* Figure with severed head on a copper plate from Etowah, Georgia (Seler 1902-23, V: 61, Pl. IV-3). *b.* Figure on a copper plate from Etowah, Georgia (Seler 1902-23, V: 45, Abb. 2). *c.* Shell plaque from a mound in southeastern Missouri (Seler 1902-23, V: 45, Abb. 1). *d.* Incised shell from a mound in Sumner County, Tennessee (Seler 1902-23, V: 45, Abb. 4). *e.* Figure with severed head from Spiro, Oklahoma (after Willey 1966: Fig. 5-61c).

temples, and the Maribio practiced the Xipe cult using the flayed skins of their enemies (*ibid.*, IV: 40-6, 101).

These Contact accounts would lead one to expect evidence for decapitation and other various aspects of the head complex to be widespread throughout space and time in the archaeological record of Mesoamerica. For the sake of organization and brevity the pertinent archaeological evidence will be presented here in a chronological sequence rather than by cultural regions.

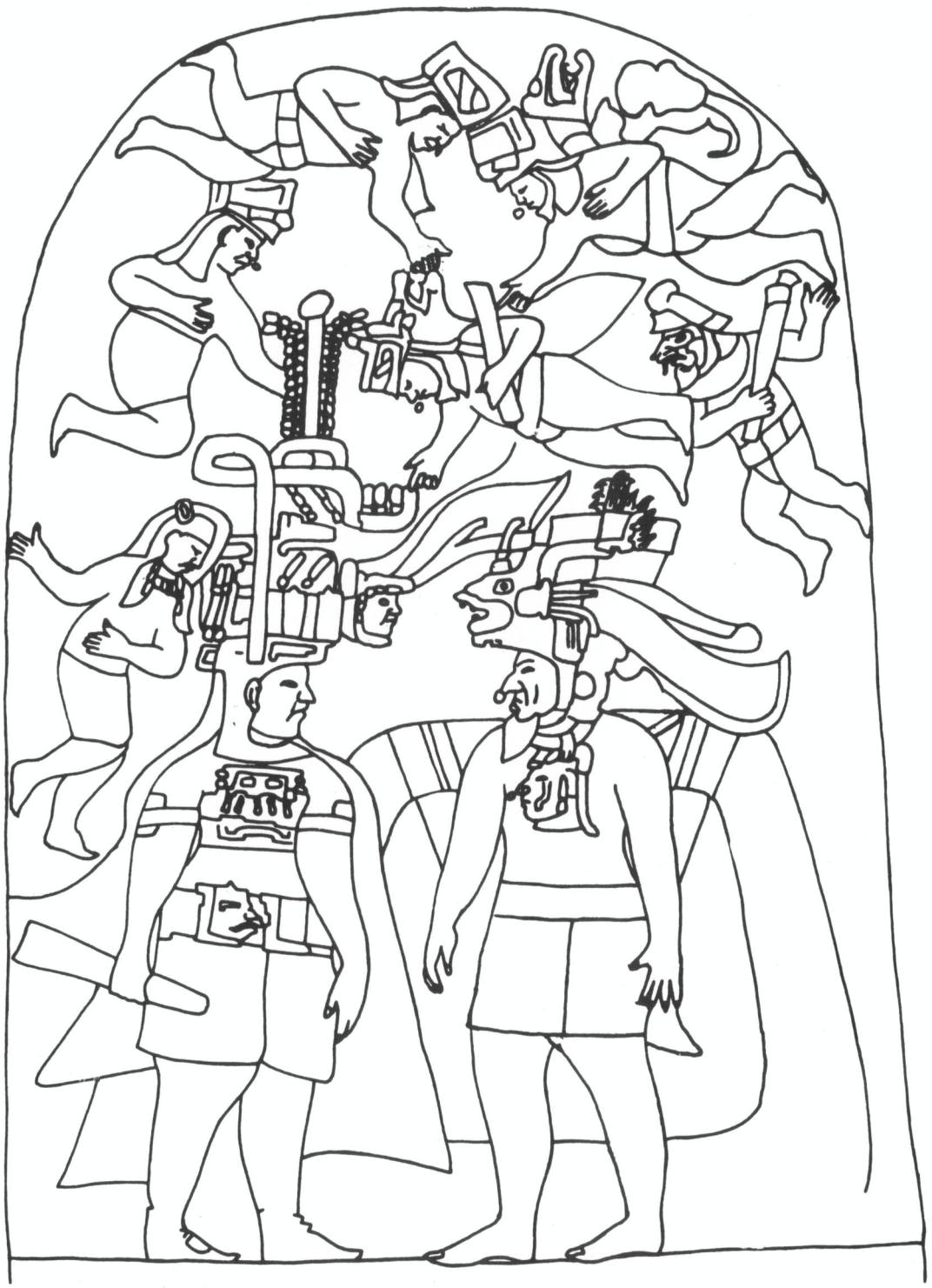
THE FORMATIVE

It is universally recognized that the Formative Olmec went to great efforts to transport and carve the monumental colossal heads found at the sites of San Lorenzo, La Venta, and Tres Zapotes. It is probable that these demonstrate the early importance of the human head as an object for representing and honoring great rulers or ancestors. Recent photographs and drawings by Heizer (1967) of Stela 3 at La Venta (Fig. 2) show clearly, for the first time, that the bearded personage on the right is wearing a human trophy head—Heizer refers to it as "a human trophy skull" (*ibid.*: 29)—suspended by the hair or by a cord through the top of the head that loops over a circular neck collar. The undated, but definitely Formative, Stela A at Tres Zapotes shows three standing figures. The right one (Fig. 3) is holding a severed human head suspended by the hair (Stirling 1943:13). Another bas-relief (Fig. 4), identified as Stela 21 from Izapa, Chiapas, depicts a warrior, or possibly a ballplayer, with the severed head of an opponent in one hand. This stela has been dated by Orellana Tapia (1955) to the Late Formative. The much-damaged warrior on Stela 1 at El Jobo, Guatemala (Fig. 5), on the upper Rio Naranjo, is carrying a severed head suspended by a strap passing through the cheeks. Just in front of the warrior is his headless captive, kneeling with his hands tied (Miles 1965:258, Fig. 15b).

The practice described by Landa for the treatment of Cocom lords apparently was originated at a very early period in Maya cultural history. In Burial 12 of the Formative Period at Uaxactún, Guatemala, the Ricketsons found an adult male skeleton that was interred extended, front down, with the feet to the west and the skull between the knees. The skull had been sawed laterally, the facial portion having been removed and not included in the burial (Ricketson and Ricketson 1937:145, Pl. 48a,b). Also at Uaxactún they found two cist burials that are probably Late Formative. Cist 4 in Temple E-III and Cist 6 in Temple E-II consisted of two plain, flat-bottomed dishes with flaring rims set lip to lip. Inside of each was a severed skull covered in the frontal region (i.e., over the facial bones) with a friable brown coating (*ibid.*: 55-8).

At Tikal, at about A.D. 16 ± 131 (M. Coe 1966:71-2), an important person was buried in a primitive corbel vault tomb, Burial 85, built directly into the North Acropolis floor fronting the principal temple of the time—Structure 5D-Sub. 1-1st. The single individual buried there lacked his head and thigh bones. The rest of his skeleton was bundled with textiles in a seated position. A small greenstone mask with shell inlaid eyes and teeth may have been sewn to the bundle to represent the missing head. A stingray spine, the common symbol of self-sacrifice among the Maya, a spondylus shell, and a brilliant orange-red thorny oyster shell were included, along with some twenty-six vessels of the Late Chicanel style. One of these pots contained the wood from which the above radiocarbon date was derived (W. Coe 1965:19,21; M. Coe 1966:71-2).

Another possible reflection of the head complex may be seen in the glyphs found on the Observatory (Mound J) at Monte Albán, Oaxaca, and dated to the Terminal Formative or Proto-



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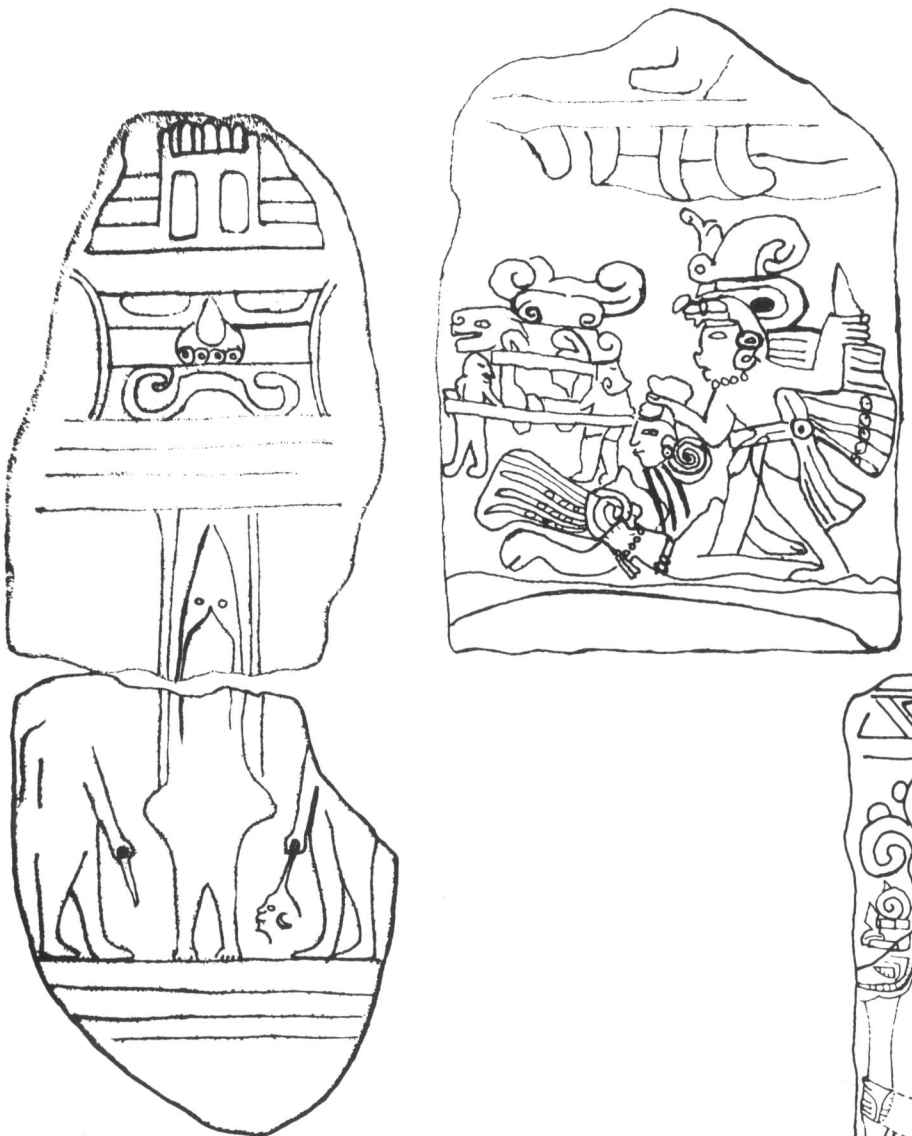


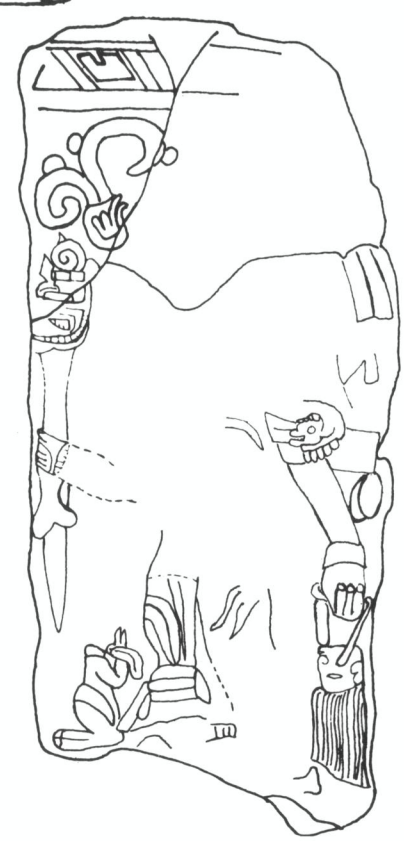


Fig. 2 (opposite) Reconstruction drawing of Stela 3, La Venta (Heizer 1967: Fig. 1).

Fig. 3 (above) Stela A, Tres Zapotes (after Stirling 1943: Fig. 3).

Fig. 4 (above, right) Stela 21, Izapa, Chiapas (after Jiménez Moreno 1966: Fig. 92).

Fig. 5 (right) Stela 1, El Jobo, Guatemala (after Miles 1965: Fig. 15b).

Classic (M.A. II). These glyphs (Fig. 6) usually consist of a place glyph, with identifying hieroglyphs above and a head hanging down below. Caso (1947:27) and others have pointed out that these glyphs probably attempt to record or commemorate the subjugation of villages to the control of the Zapotec Monte Albán priestly rulers and that the heads represent the captured and decapitated caciques of those towns. This is in agreement with the archaeological evidence from throughout the Valley of Oaxaca, which shows the increasing political influence of this centralized urban center. Howard Leigh (1958:4-5), however, has argued that these glyphs are astrological or astronomical in content rather than historical. He suggests that the place glyph is a symbol in a more general sense for the earth or for "planet." The inverted heads, he feels, represent the planets or the constellations passing below the Earth in order to resume their heavenly procession the following day.

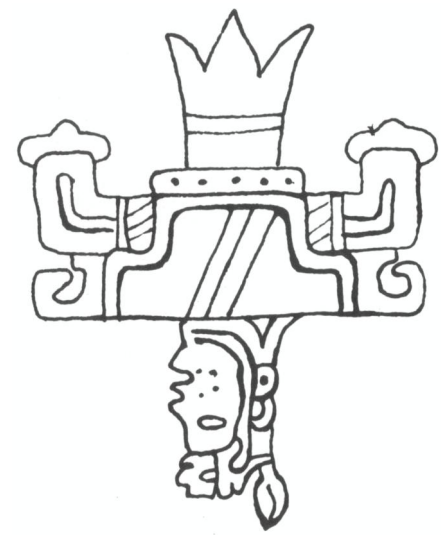


Fig. 6 Glyph on Stone 16, Mound J, Monte Albán, Oaxaca. Head is inverted beneath place glyph (after Caso 1947: Fig. 45).

THE CLASSIC

An ever-increasing number of examples of the head complex can be found from Classic times onward. George Vaillant in his *Aztecs of Mexico* (1965:92) states that "the Swedish archaeologist Linné, at Xolalpan [a Classic structure in Teotihuacán], found richly endowed burials . . . In some of these the entire skeleton was buried; others contained only the skull, covered by a bowl or inside such a bowl with another on top. There is as yet no explanation for the practice. . . ." Unfortunately I have been unable to locate any reports of these skull burials found by Linné.

The Classic Zapotec (Monte Albán IIIb) Tombs 58 and 103 contained, as part of the offerings, two fascinating Xipe urns (Pls. I, II). Both of these ceramic urn effigies hold a severed human head in their left hands (for different views see Caso and Bernal 1952: Figs. 396, 400). Another Classic urn of a personage with a serpent mask from Tlacochahuaya (Pl. III) has a head suspended upside down by the neck from his necklace, as does also the standing Monte Albán III-B figure from Mitla (Pl. IV), in the same manner as the central figure in Lintel 12 at Yaxchilán (Fig. 7) and the standing figurine from La Libertad, Chiapas (Pl. V).

In his synthesis of Maya cultural development, Borhegyi (1965:22-3) notes that during the Classic "a curious new custom is represented by headless burials as well as caches of severed heads." He continues (*ibid.*: 23, fn. 28):

> The custom of severing the heads of both infants and adults and burying them apart from the body between two bowls placed lip to lip may have originated on the Gulf coast of Mexico or among the Lowland Maya. In the Tropical Rain Forest the trait first appears during Chicanel (Late Preclassic) times at Uaxactun and other sites, and it became increasingly common during the Classic period. . . . Burials of decapitated

Fig. 7 Lintel 12, Yaxchilán, Chiapas (after Spinden 1913: Fig. 10).

bodies or skull burials are reported from Chukumuk, Kaminaljuyú, and Nebaj. In one instance 12 skulls were placed in a single burial (Burial 4, Late Classic or Early Postclassic at Nebaj; A.L. Smith and Kidder, 1951, Fig. 46,*a*). That the persons in question had been decapitated is proven by the fact that in some instances two or three of the upper vertebrae were present with the skulls.

Lothrop (1933:24, Fig. 6d) reported that no less than eight decapitated burials were found in the vicinity of Chukumuk, Guatemala.

In the Early Classic "Painted Tomb" chamber

of Burial 48 at Tikal the main occupant was a male over fifty years old. "Prior to his entombment, not only his head but his extremities as well were removed by the survivors, presumably as relics" (W. Coe 1965:29). A very unusual polychrome two-part effigy vessel from Burial 10 (Pl. VI*a-b*) found under an Early Classic structure at Tikal, shows the grotesque Old God sitting on a tripod formed by human femora and holding a human head in his hands (*ibid.*: 24). At Tikal skulls were also used ritually, as can be seen in the Classic Altar 5, which shows two priests kneeling on either side of an altar of bones on which rests a fleshless skull (Greene and Thompson 1967: Pl. 11).

At Kaminaljuyú, excavators uncovered two tombs with trophy skulls. Tomb A-III had three skulls of 12-14 years of age, while Tomb A-V had three adult skulls. All these skulls were placed base down on the floor with the lower jaw in position indicating that they were severed heads and not redeposited skulls. In Tomb B-IV at Kaminaljuyú, another skull, this time elaborately carved, was found which is presumed to be a trophy skull (Kidder, Jennings, and Shook 1946:90, Figs. 165, 170h).

Lintel 12 at Yaxchilán (Fig. 7) shows an important lord standing before kneeling captives. He has a head hanging hair down from his collar, and crossbones decorate his dress (Spinden 1913:23). This is very similar to the Classic standing clay figurine from near Comitán and La Libertad in the Chiapas highland plateau (Pl. V). This bearded personage wears a small trophy head hung hair down from a necklace in the same manner as the Tlacochahuaya effigy urn (Pl. III). From this same general area of Comitán, Seler (1901:190) illustrated an undated stone carving (Pl. VII), possibly Late Classic in style, of a man (hunchback ?) with his left hand on his right shoulder, the stance of submission, and wearing a human trophy head suspended upside down from a cord passing through the neck. Also Lintel 9 at Yaxchilán (Fig. 8) includes a figure wearing a necklace with five small heads hung upside down. Proskouriakoff

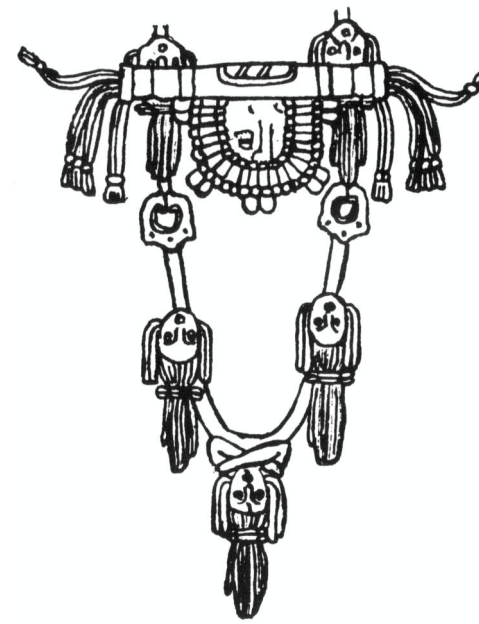


Fig. 8 Necklace with headlets, detail from Lintel 9, Yaxchilán, Chiapas (after Proskouriakoff 1950: Fig. 22*y*).

(1950:64) notes a similarity between these lintels and a stela at Etzná, Campeche. However, in contrast to Borhegyi's statement above, she feels that this fashion of displaying trophy heads and the decapitation of war captives is "probably an influence from the Chiapas highlands, where such heads seem to be characteristic." I concur with this view and will offer evidence from two other Chiapas eastern highland sites in support of this hypothesis.

Two bas-relief panels at Palenque, the Tablet of the Palace and the Tablet of the Slaves (Fig. 9*a-b*), which date by the Goodman-Martinez-Thompson correlation to between A.D. 615 and 782, show what is believed to be an installation ceremony of a priestly ruler. In the Tablet of the Slaves he is presented from the left with a large headdress of quetzal feathers, and from the right he is offered what appears to be a trophy head or perhaps, as Leigh (1961:6) suggests, a stuffed head, possibly that of his predecessor. Among the contents of the Classic tomb chamber

a

b

Fig. 9 Tablets from Palenque, Chiapas: *a.* Detail of the Tablet of the Slaves. *b.* Detail of the Tablet of the Palace (Greene and Thompson 1967: Pls. 33, 34).

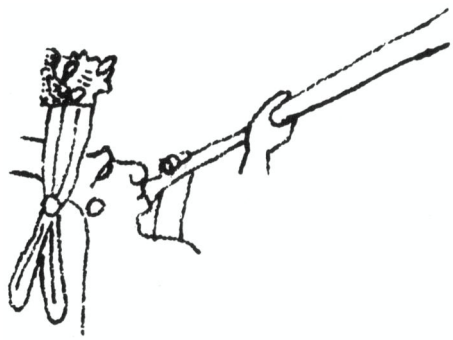


Fig. 10 Detail of the mural on the west wall of Room 2, Structure 1, Bonampak (after painting by Antonio Tejeda F., Ruppert *et al.* 1955: Fig. 28).

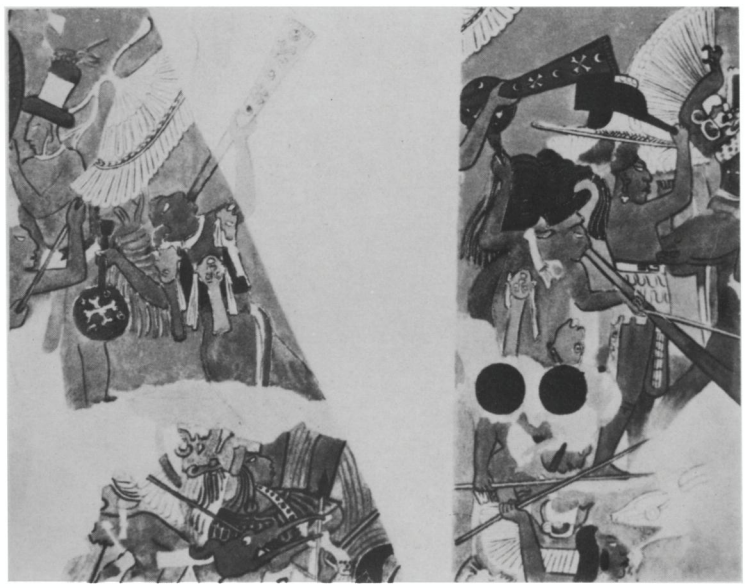
within the Temple of the Inscriptions at Palenque, two stucco heads were found that are believed to have been offered as symbolical decapitations, as they appear to have been cut from whole figures (Thompson 1954: Pl. 23).

The beautiful Late Classic murals (A.D. 800 G.M.T.) at Bonampak are especially informative (see Ruppert, Thompson, and Proskouriakoff 1955). In Room 2 of Structure 1 there is a series of wall paintings describing a raid and the subsequent treatment of the captives. In the midst of the battle in the lower panel, far to the left, there is an individual blowing a long horn and wearing a small human head as part of his headdress (Fig. 10). This is similar to the head that appears in the headdress of the main figure in Lintel 12 from Yaxchilán, which was described above (Fig. 7). In the upper panel at the corner formed by the west and south walls there are two more figures blowing horns (Fig. 11*a*). Both carry in their right hands circular fans marked with four death eyes and crossed bones. The one on the west wall blows a long horn marked with the same death eyes and crossbones and wears three small heads hanging upside down from his collar. His companion on the south wall appears to have two heads suspended in the same manner. A central and obviously high-ranking lord in the upper rear of the south wall (Fig. 11*b*) is wearing a seated-jaguar and jade-bead headdress and has two heads hanging hair down from his large green jade collar. Finally in the Judgment of the Captives scene in the upper panel of the north wall just above the doorway (Fig. 11*c*) there is a severed head or facial skin lying on leaves at the right foot of a just-slain captive.

Similarly, numerous Classic Maya stone sculptures and engraved plaques depict priests, rulers, and gods wearing actual or imitative human heads suspended from necklaces and belts. Most of these, however, fail to meet the requirements I have set forth to distinguish real examples of severed heads, head-shrinking, and the like. Yet the human heads that embellish the figure on the Leiden Plate (Fig. 12*a*), which is from Puerto Barrios, Guatemala, and dates to about A.D. 320; the figure in the stela from Tzendales (Fig. 12*b*), which is another site in the eastern highlands of Chiapas; and Stelae 15, 51, and 89 from Calakmul, Campeche (Ruppert and Denison 1943: Pls. 49, 50c, 53b), and Stelae P (Fig. 12*c*), B, and N from Copán, Honduras (Marquina 1951: Láms. 181, 178, 179), are all treated in such a manner as to suggest that these are trophy heads, if not shrunken heads.

One example that does fit our criteria is a standing figurine in the Carrillo Gil collection in Mexico City (Pl. VIII). This magnificent Classic Maya figure is from the cemetery on the Isla de Jaina (A.D. 600-900), Campeche. This male figure wears a skull hung from a bead collar, and two small human heads are suspended hair down from his belt (Gamboa 1963:169, 178).

Evidence of decapitation is relatively rare in the Gulf Coast region until well into the Classic. However, here we are presented with the first direct association between the ballgame and decapitation. One stela from Aparicio, Veracruz (Fig. 13), in a Classic style, but dating to the Late Classic, portrays a seated ballplayer complete with *palma* and hammerstone or stone weight. His head has been severed and seven intertwined snakes sprout from the neck (M. Coe 1962:120). A Late Classic eagle warrior holding a severed head is shown on the reverse



a

b

Fig. 11 Murals at Bonampak, Structure 1, Room 2: *a.* Heralds of death wearing shrunken head trophies. West and south wall corner. Painting by Antonio Tejeda F. *b.* Maya war chief wearing seated jaguar headdress and shrunken head trophies. South wall. Painting by Antonio Tejeda F. *c.* Decapitated head at the foot of a slain captive. North wall (after painting by Antonio Tejeda F., Ruppert *et al.* 1955: Fig. 28).

c

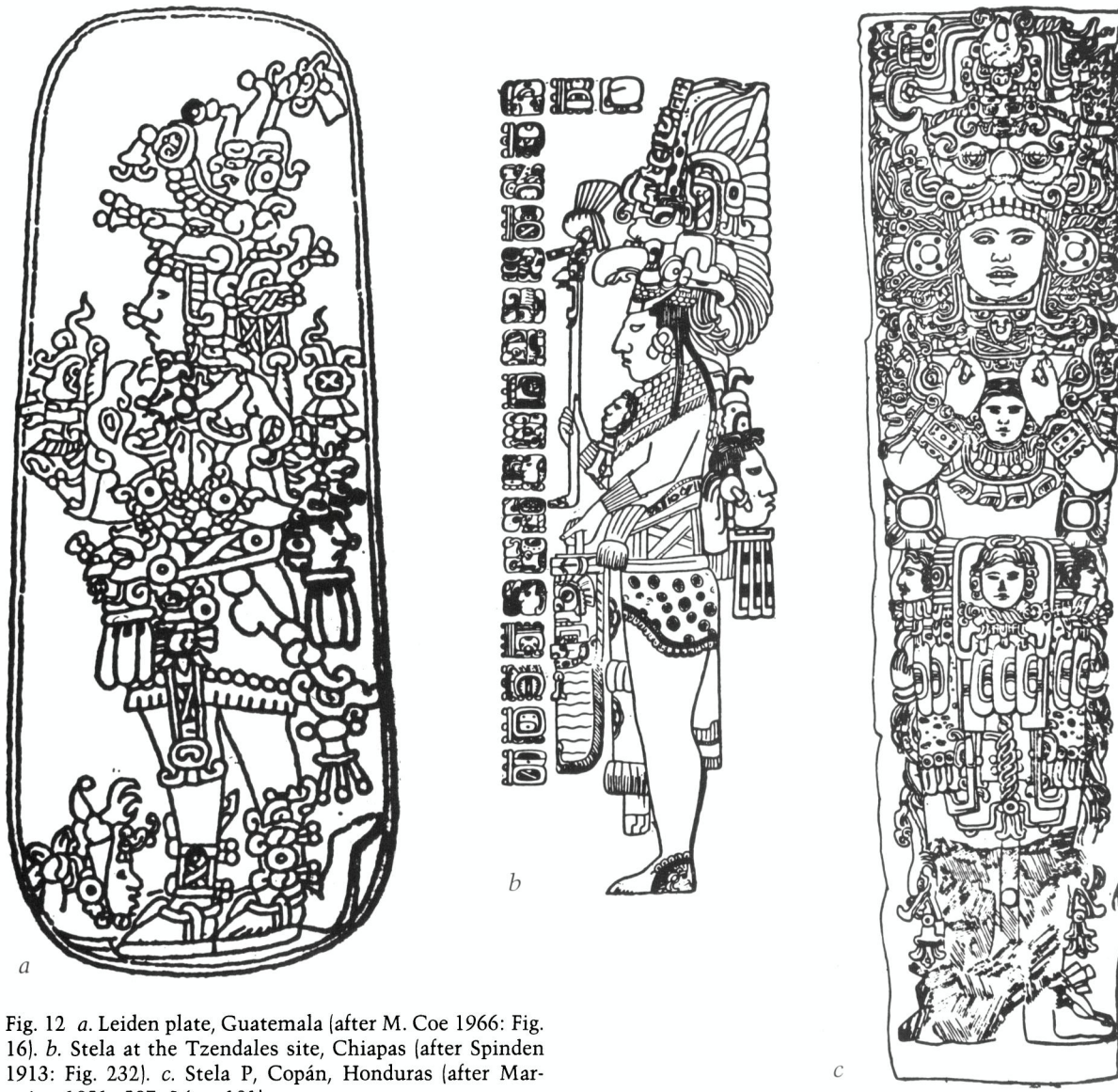


Fig. 12 *a.* Leiden plate, Guatemala (after M. Coe 1966: Fig. 16). *b.* Stela at the Tzendales site, Chiapas (after Spinden 1913: Fig. 232). *c.* Stela P, Copán, Honduras (after Marquina 1951: 597, Lám. 181).

of a Coatepec, Veracruz, *palma* (Fig. 14). *Palmas,* of course, are a recognized part of the ballgame paraphernalia (see Proskouriakoff 1954:81-3, Figs. 6-8).

In "El Deporte Prehispánico" Caso and Gutiérrez (1965:124-5) illustrate a Late Classic or Post-Classic seated "Totonac" ballplayer with Tlaloc-style ringed eyes, a jaguar head *palma* and *yugo,* and small faces attached by a strap just below each knee (Pl. XI). These appear to be face skins with closed eyes and are not whole heads. The decapitated ballplayer in the Post-Classic Chichén Itzá ballcourt (Fig. 19) wears similar knee pads, and the main figure in Stela

Fig. 13 Late Classic stela at Aparicio, Veracruz. Photograph by the author.

21 at Santa Lucía Cotzumalhuapa, Guatemala (Fig. 15), has a headlet attached to a point just below the knee. This trait of using human facial skin or carved leather knee pads has its earliest representation on the ballplayer of the Classic Maya (A.D. 590) limestone disk from Chinkultic, in the eastern highlands of Chiapas (Gamboa 1963:164), and on another Classic figurine from Tecolpan, Chiapas (Rands and Rands 1965: Fig. 30).

Fig. 14 Reverse of a Late Classic *palma* from Coatepec, Veracruz (after Knauth 1961: Fig. 5).

During the Epi-Classic (the period between the fall of Teotihuacán and other major central highland Mexican urban centers in about A.D. 650 and the florescence of Tula in about A.D. 800) there is a marked increase in associations between ballgame activities, decapitation, and the more general aspects of necrophilia. Stone ballcourt reliefs at El Tajín, Veracruz, show a scene of decapitation. Tuggle (1965:11-12) has reconstructed several scenes on the columns at El Tajín and describes one which is dominated by a seated figure, probably a priest or priest-ruler, who seems to be presiding over the ceremonies taking place in front of him. At the feet of the seated personage are two severed heads. A sacrificial victim lies atop a stylized ballcourt structure, and a priest holds a knife above his chest.

It is argued by Jiménez Moreno and others that a general dispora of Pipiles or "nobles" oc-

curred with the breakup of Teotihuacán. It is thought that some groups migrated through the eastern Gulf region, while others passed along the southern coast before eventually establishing themselves in Xolotan (i.e., the Soconusco coast) and Guatemala. Further, Jiménez Moreno believes (1966:65, Map 4) that the Pipiles brought the *yugo-hacha-palma* complex from Veracruz to these regions. In this respect numerous scholars have pointed out the probable Huastec origin of a number of important central Mesoamerican deities, including Ehecatl and Tlazolteotl, as well as architectural styles such as the conical round temple platform of the Wind God (see, for example, Seler 1902-3:140-1; Meade 1953:296-7).

Certain similarities between the Late Classic El Tajín ballcourt bas-reliefs and those at Santa Lucía Cotzumalhuapa, Guatemala, cannot be denied. Especially noteworthy is the similar treatment of the sky gods, skeleton men, and death gods. Parsons' recent excavations at nearby Bilbao and Santa Lucía (1967) suggest an even earlier development in this area that gave rise to the later Epi-Classic styles and which may have been contemporaneous with Teotihuacán III. The strong contacts and influences between the Classic Teotihuacanos and the Maya of highland Guatemala, especially at Kaminaljuyú, have long been recognized. In view of the earlier and stronger presence of decapitation in the Maya highlands, it would seem probable that during the Early and Middle Classic there was a steady feedback of this trait into the Veracruz region where it was combined with the ballgame ritual. Unfortunately references in Sahagún to the taking of head trophies in war by the Huastecans pertain only to the Contact or very late Post-Classic period at best, and as yet we lack sufficient archaeological evidence to demonstrate a greater temporal range for this trait in the Gulf Coast region.

There are four monuments at Santa Lucía Cotzumalhuapa that require special treatment here. Monument 1 (Fig. 16) depicts four messenger gods and a ballplayer holding severed human heads. On Monument 3 (Fig. 17) a ballplayer appears to be offering the severed head of his opponent to a solar deity. Monument 4 (Fig. 18) is similar in that a head rests on some sort of altar, but here the ballplayer wears a head skin on his left hand while raising his right arm up toward a combined sky and vegetation deity. Finally, Monument 21 (Fig. 15) shows a central standing figure which has a small headlet attached by the hair to his left knee. In front of him an old bearded man has what appears to be a hand puppet or human effigy on his right hand and a bone awl in his left hand. They seem to be standing in a virtual jungle of vegetation, flowers and fruit.

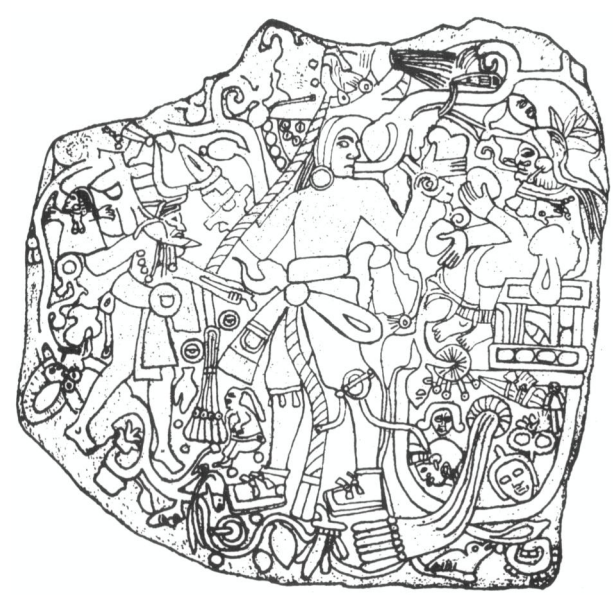


Fig. 15 Monument 21, Santa Lucía Cotzumalhuapa, Guatemala (after Thompson 1948: Fig. 6d).

Fig. 16 (left) Monument 1, Santa Lucía Cotzumalhuapa, Guatemala (after Jiménez Moreno 1966: Fig. 60).

Fig. 17 (center) Monument 3, Santa Lucía Cotzumalhuapa, Guatemala (after Jiménez Moreno 1966: Fig. 58).

Fig. 18 (right) Monument 4, Santa Lucía Cotzumalhuapa, Guatemala (after M. Coe 1966: Fig. 20).

It is during the Early Post-Classic, or era of Toltec influence, that the Central Mexican highland cultures placed emphasis in their art on various aspects of the more southern Mexican head complex, in direct contrast to the lack of it in the murals and reliefs at Teotihuacán. By the late Post-Classic and Mexica-Mixtec florescence the evidence and interpretation possibilities become almost overwhelming.

At Tula, the Toltec capitol, however, there is only a small altar decorated with carved stone skulls and crossbones associated with the Corral (a round temple dedicated to Ehecatl, the Wind God) that attests to a possible use of the skull rack. At least one very similar structure can be found at Chichén Itzá, Yucatán. Much more expressive, however, are the bas-relief panels of the great Toltec ballcourt at the latter site. On the east bench a ballplayer is depicted holding the severed head of his opponent whose decapitated body kneels to the right (Fig. 19). Some have argued on the basis of supposed dress styles that this panel commemorates the defeat of the Lowland Maya by the Toltec invaders. The case for this is very weak and, I feel, untenable without more direct evidence. The snakes sprouting from the decapitated figure are similar to those on the stela from Aparicio, Veracruz (Fig. 13). Also of interest at Chichén Itzá are the reliefs in the chamber of the North Temple of the ballcourt. In these reliefs some sort of preparation ceremony is shown being carried out over a head that rests in a bowl (Marquina 1951:867, Fot. 440).

In his 1908 paper on the ruins of Chichén Itzá delivered at the Sixteenth International Congress of Americanists, Eduard Seler (1902-23, V:384) reported finding several fragments of stone heads and bodies located in the bush southeast of the road that goes west toward Rancho Piste. One of these is a torso (Fig. 20) that has two heads suspended upside down by a cord from the neck. The upper head has the distinctive ringed eyes of the rain god, Tlaloc. The style of these fragments appears to be of Toltec design.

A possible link between the Formative treatment of skulls, as in Cists 4 and 6 and Burial

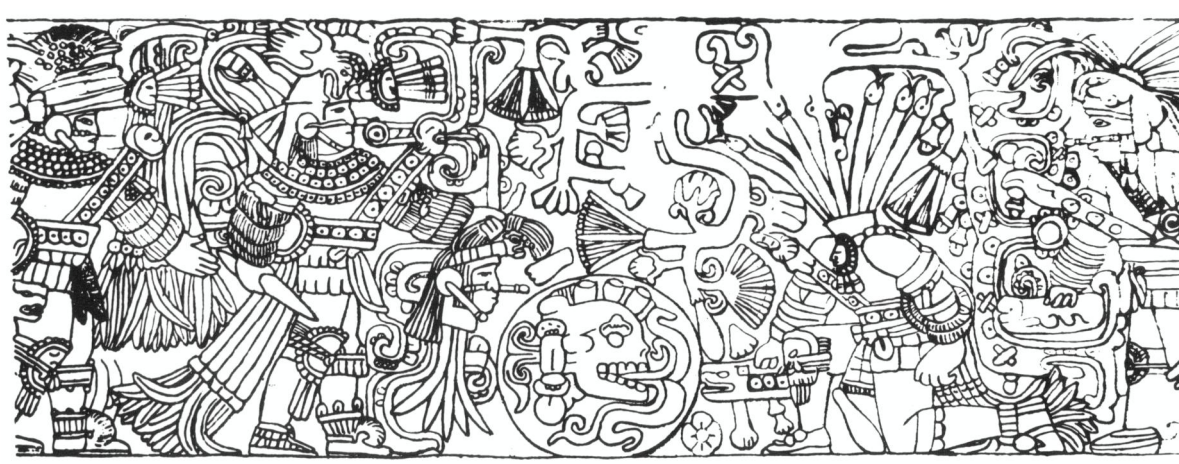


Fig. 19 Post-Classic ballcourt panel on east bench, Chichén Itzá (after Proskouriakoff 1950: Fig. 106c).

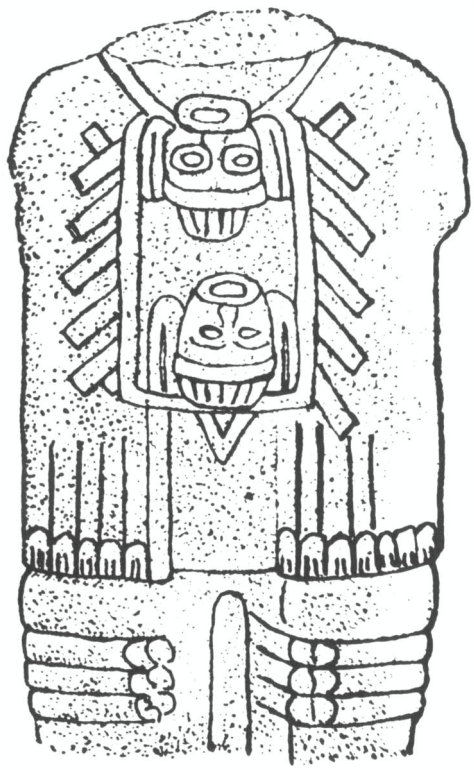


Fig. 20 Stone torso, Chichén Itza (after Seler 1902-23, V: 384, Abb. 265).

4 at Uaxactún, and the post-contact description by Landa is provided by a skull from the Cenote of Sacrifice at Chichén Itzá. The crown of the skull had been cut away, the eye sockets filled with wooden plugs, and remains of plaster were found over the face (Tozzer 1941:131, fn. 613).

An isolated male (age 35) skull (no. 22) from Xochicalco, Morelos, was found with its whole vault cut through from the orbital ridge to the base of the skull at the back. The cut is somewhat irregular and the edges are beveled. This skull was found with its lower jaw in articulation and was undeformed (Stewart 1956:136, 138, 143, Pl. 7). Unfortunately it was unassociated with datable artifacts, but it is probably Post-Classic.

In another paper (Moser n.d.) I have expressed the opinion that the so called "cabecitas colosales" in the Frissell Museum and the Mexican National Museum of Anthropology, which are from the Mixteca Baja or Nuiñe region, are related to the head complex and may actually be ceramic representations of shrunken trophy heads.

Also in Oaxaca the fashion of wearing human heads upside down as part of a necklace, as already seen in the Classic Tlacochahuaya urn, carries over into the Monte Albán IV mold-made figurines from Lambityeco (Fig. 21*a-c*; Leigh 1961:4-5, Figs. 1-2). The figurine in Pl. XVI wears a possibly shrunken human head suspended at the waist by a shoulder strap. Like Figure 27, it is believed to be from the Tehuántepec region of southern Oaxaca. George Vaillant (1965:92) mentions that "in Oaxaca the separate burial of heads is supposed to have to do with the cult of Xipe. . .", but unfortunately he gives no source for this statement. Sahagún (1950-70, II:39) is very explicit that Xipe Totec "was the god of the seashore people, the proper god of the Zapotecs." Ignacio Bernal found nine *cajetes* in a circle, each containing a skull and two vertebrae, at San Luis Beltran in the Valley of Oaxaca, which probably date to the early Post-Classic or Lambityeco Phase (Bernal: personal communication, 1970).

From the Gulf Coast Drucker (1943:23, Pl. 11; see also Stirling 1941:289-90) reports that his trench 40 at Cerro de las Mesas, Veracruz, uncovered several layers of covered pots containing decapitated skulls. The more than fifty pots with their skulls were arranged in double rows and separated by thin stucco floors within a small mound; they seem to have been deposited in one operation. These vessels and skulls all date to the Post-Classic.

Display of decapitated heads, possibly shrunken, and trophy skulls continued unabated in the Chiapas highland region of Comitán and just across the border in the Chaculá region of Guatemala. Seler (1901) illustrated a stone statue (Pl. IX), about one meter in height, from Hacienda Chaculá and three similar statues from Pueblo Viejo Quen Santo (Pl. IX*b-d*), all of

which have several headlets suspended from necklaces. The unusual topknotted stone figure (Pl. IX*d*) wears, besides a necklace of upended heads, several heads as part of its headdress. Still more striking are the two stone statues (Pl. X) Seler illustrated from Cave I near Quen Santo. These jaguar figures wear five or more heads suspended upside down across their chests. The eyes and mounts of these headlets are shown as large ringed ovals or circles in the manner of some Xipe Totec figures.

The Post-Classic mural on the west wall of Mound 1 at Santa Rita Corozal, British Honduras (Fig. 22; Gann 1900:669), depicts a dancing figure with a severed head held by the hair in each hand. This is one of the rare instances where one of the severed heads can be identified. Both the standing figure to the left of the dancer and the head the dancer holds in his right hand show the red-and-blue-faced "Pinocchio"-nosed god, probably Yacapitzauac ("he with the pointed nose") or Yacacoluihqui ("he with the eagle-beaked nose"), both Central Mexican aspects of the Merchant God described by Durán and Sahagún (Thompson 1966: 165-6). The close similarity in the appearance of this god to the manner in which he is depicted in the Codex Fejérváry-Mayer indicates a heavy

a *b* *c*

Fig. 21 Oaxacan Post-Classic (MA IV) figurines and press mold with decapitated human heads as part of their costumes: *a.* Figurine from Tanivet, Oaxaca; *b.* Press mold for manufacture of figurines from Lambityeco, Oaxaca; *c.* Bearded figurine from Lambityeco, Oaxaca. Museo Frissell, Mitla, Oaxaca. Photographs by the author.

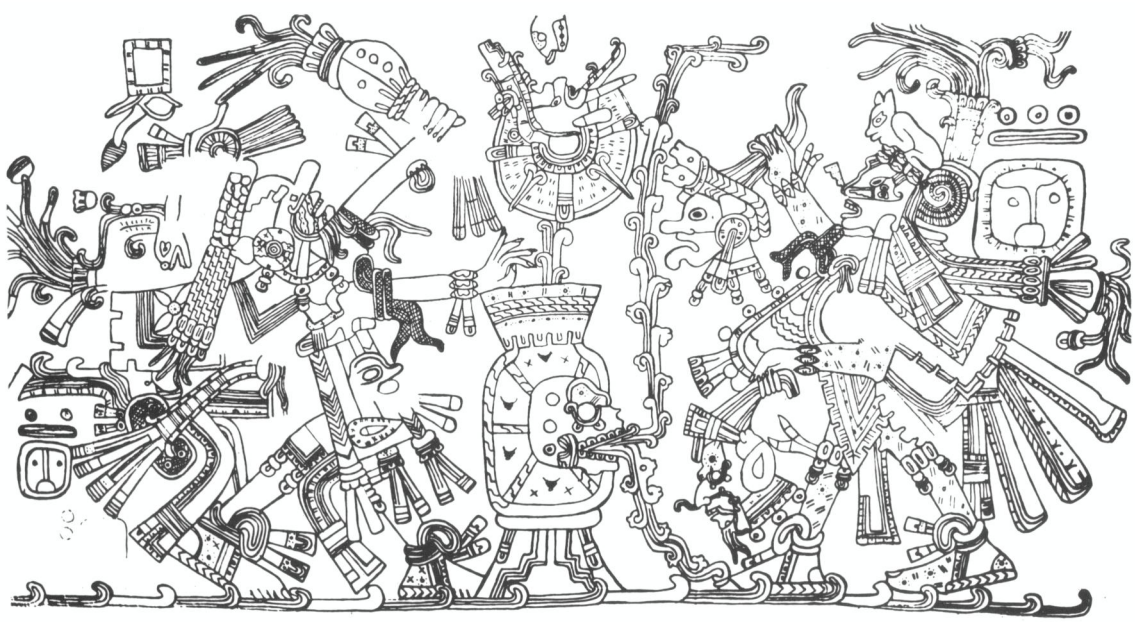


Fig. 22 Post-Classic mural on the west wall of Mound 1, Santa Rita Corozal, British Honduras (after Gann 1900: Pl. XXXI).

influence of Central Mexican traits into this Maya region. Jiménez Moreno (1966: Map 7) has argued for an extension of Toltec influence to Santa Rita through southern Guatemala and Quiriguá. Paddock (1966: 201) argues that the influence felt at Santa Rita was Tetlamixtecan or Mixteca-Puebla in nature, emanating from Cholula. However, a southern Gulf Coast provenience for the Codex Fejérváry-Mayer has been suggested (Nicholson 1966: 155) and the importance of cacao trade over routes from Honduras (it is possible that Santa Rita was part of the market complex known as Chetumal when the Spanish arrived) to Xicalanco on the Tabasco coast and thence to highland Mexico may account for the obvious blending of cultural traits in the Santa Rita murals.

Excavations at Almulunga, 4 kilometers northeast of Tazumal in western El Salvador at the southern fringe of Mesoamerica, have uncovered a relief of a decapitated human or god of near-actual size. This figure is seated, legs extended and widely separated, on the lower level of a stepped altar or throne in the main mound at this site. Associated pottery includes plumbate, and it has been dated to the Post-Classic (Boggs 1967: 57). Lothrop (1936:142-3 Fig. 2) describes a cylindrical jar from Mexicanus near San Salvador which shows a standing figure with a trophy head hung hair down from his belt. Two cylindrical jars from the Ulua valley of Honduras (*ibid.*: Figs. 3, 6) are also of interest. On one vessel trophy heads form part of the collar of both standing figures and on the other a man holds a severed head in his left hand.

In the northwestern part of Mesoamerica there is only limited evidence for a pre-Hispanic head complex. It is expected that as more systematic archaeological investigations are carried out in this area more evidence for decapitation and trophy heads will be uncovered.

In the Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin, there is a human effigy jar from Colima with two small trophy heads (Pl. XII; Disselhoff

1955: Pl. 7; Krickeberg 1961: Pl. 117b). The jar is 38 centimeters high and is in the form of a seated man raising a cup to his mouth. The headlets appear to be attached to straps that cross his chest from shoulder to waist. The heads, with open eyes and mouths, project out to the right and left over his ribs. A nearly identical burnished red and brown hollow figurine from Colima (Pl. XIII) is illustrated by von Winning and Stendahl (1968: 70, Pl. 71). Von Winning further refers (*ibid.*: 71, Pl. 84) to hollow clay portrait heads of Colima, which vary in size from that of a fist to that of a normal head, as possible representations of trophy heads like those worn by the two figures described from Colima.

Recent excavations in the cemetery at Tizapan El Alto, Jalisco, uncovered five undisturbed, skull-less skeletons (Meighan and Foote 1968: 42-54). All were males lacking mandibles and upper cervical vertebrae, strongly suggesting that those individuals had been decapitated prior to interment. Three of the skull-less bodies (Burials 12a-c) were found together in a single grave pit, while the others (Burials 26 and 37) were individual interments. No offerings were placed with these burials, though Burial 37 had a large flint point beneath the ribs suggesting a wound which may have contributed to his death. All five were estimated to be between 24 and 40 years of age, and all were buried in the common pattern of tight seated flexure facing the East. Interestingly this orientation is directly opposite that of the majority of the males in this cemetery, whereas females are usually placed in an East-facing position. Probably these atypical adult males were captured in battle, beheaded, and buried in a disgraceful manner without burial goods of any kind. The Colima effigy jars and the burials at Tizapan may reflect the pre-Hispanic war practices of the Xixime, Acaxee, Coras, and Tepehuanes, previously described by Pérez de Ribas, Santarén, and Beals.

Of all the peoples of Mesoamerica, none seem to have been more concerned with death and sacrifice than the Nahuatl-speaking Mexicas or Aztecs of Tenochtitlan. Trophy heads, skulls, and decapitation were important elements of Aztec mythology, ideology, and life. Significantly, among the gifts believed sent by Moctezuma II to Cortés were two mosaic-encrusted skulls. The inclusion of mosaic-covered skulls in Tomb 7 at Monte Albán and in tombs at Yagul, Oaxaca, attest to the importance and value placed on head trophies, especially those taken from important chiefs or *caciques.* Trophy skulls have been traced back to the Formative, but the refinement of rebuilding their features with bits of turquoise, pyrite, coral, and gold seems to have developed only during the Post-Classic. This may have been a natural development out of the Maya technique of sawing off the front part of the skull and replacing the facial skin as Landa decribed (Tozzer 1941: 131). A possibly Early Post-Classic mosaic skull with wooden eye plugs was recovered from the Chichén Itzá cenote (Tozzer 1941: 131, fn. 613). Leigh (1961: 6) has suggested that wooden and stone mosaic masks were placed over the faces of great personages when they were laid out in their tombs because the facial skin had been removed for tanning and use in other ceremonies.

This concern with symbols of death and emphasis on skull trophies is reflected in the *tzompantli* (Fig. 23*a*), a huge rack on which the severed heads of captured and sacrificed warriors were displayed. These heads rapidly deteriorated and for this reason the racks are usually referred to as "skull racks." Bernal Díaz (1956: 119, 223) describes two *tzompantli,* one in Xocotlan with over one hundred thousand skulls and the other in the central square of Tenochtitlan. The latter was also described by Durán (1964: 111). In his *Relación* Andrés de Tápia (1866: 583) describes the method of arrangement of skulls on this great rack, and then adds, ". . . the writer and a certain Gonzalo de Umbria counted the cross sticks which were stretched from pole to pole, as I have described, and multiplying by five skulls per cross piece we found there to be one hundred thirty-six

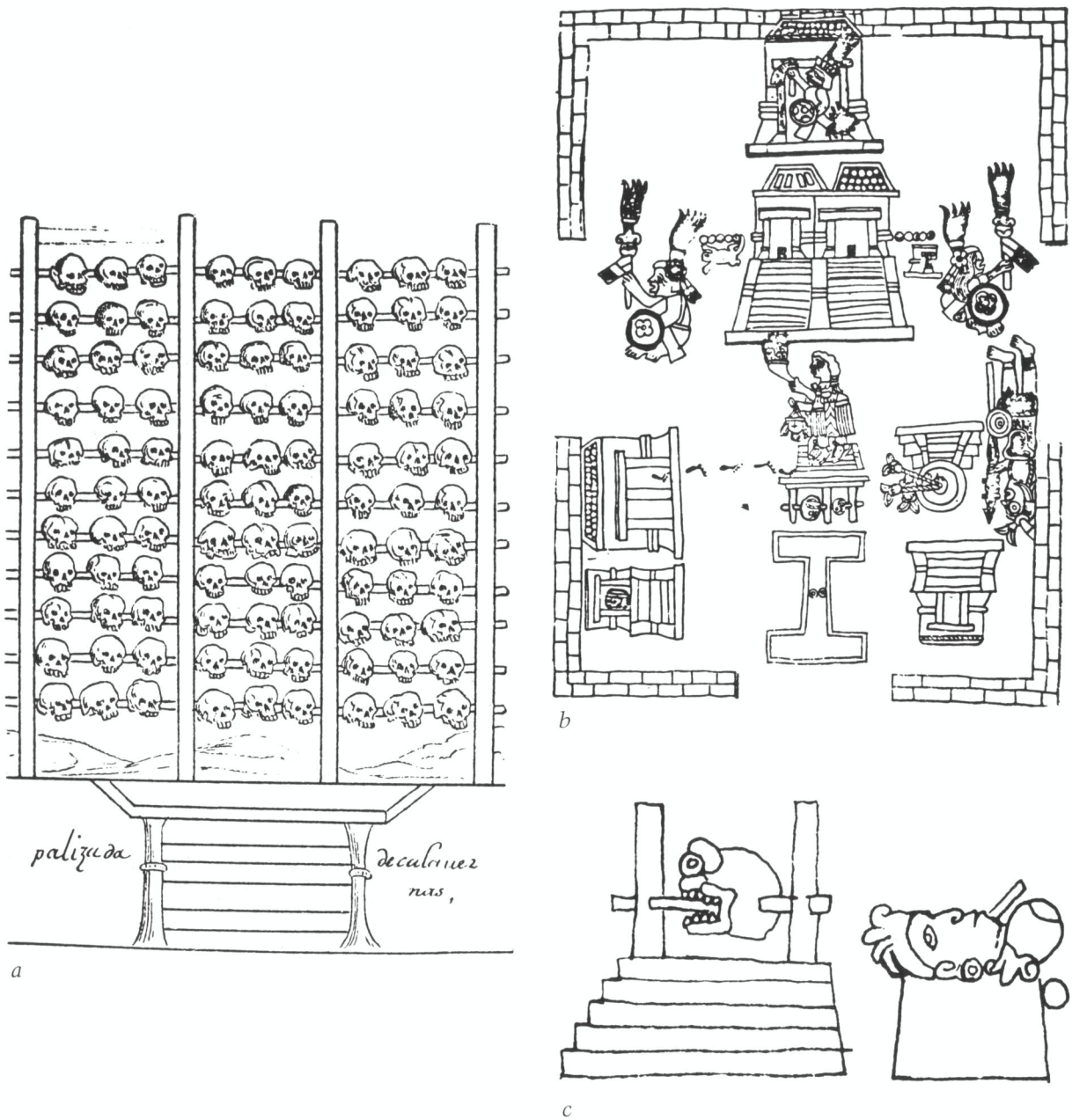


Fig. 23 *a. Tzompantli,* Tenochtitlan (after Durán 1951, Atlas: Lám. a3a). *b.* Plan of Tenochititlan, showing the *tzompantli, tlachtli,* and gladiatorial stone. Codex Matritense, VI: Estampa XI. *c. Tzompantli* and vessel containing a severed head and a human heart. Codex Borbonicus, p. 13.

thousand heads . . ." [author's translation]. Sahagún's diagram of what is usually identified as the central temple complex of Tenochtitlan (Fig. 23*b*), but which must, in fact, be only one of the smaller compounds within that great square or a plan of another city, shows that the *tzompantli* was located between the ballcourt and the main platform with the twin temples.

Gonzáles Rul (1963: 5) has reported that in excavations at Tlatelolco over 170 skulls were found in one area, each of which had perforations at the temporals and parietals so that the trophy head could be strung on a *tzompantli* pole.

Sahagún (1950-70, III: 123, 172) describes the placing of severed heads on the *tzompantli* as the final act of seven different *veintena* (20-day month of the Aztec year) rituals of the Mexica. Many of these heads were erected in front of or on different temples in addition to the Great Rack described above. It is not made very explicit but it would seem that this Great Rack was used to display the severed heads of those sacrificed to Huitzilopochtli during the Panquetzaliztli or 15th *veintena*, as well as for those offered to Tlaloc during the 13th *veintena* of Tepeilhuitl. Other temples with skull racks include Yopico, where "they strung up the severed heads of captives and of those whom they slew in gladiatorial sacrifices at the feast of Tlacaxipeualiztli" during the second *veintena* (*ibid.*: 175). Another was the temple of Yiacatecutli (one of the Merchant Gods), where the severed heads of those who were cast into a fire before their hearts were torn out were hung upon the first day of Xocotlhuetzi, the 10th *veintena*. During the 12th *veintena*, Teotleco, similar sacrifices were made to Titlacauan (another Tezcatlipoca) by thrusting captives into flames before pulling them out for heart sacrifice. Once again their severed heads were displayed on a skull frame (*ibid.*: 168-9). Another skull rack was associated with the Temple of Mixcoatl (a stellar god) and was probably used during the Quecholli ceremonies (*ibid.*: 166). Yet another was located in the compound of the temple to Omacatl, an aspect or counterpart of Tezcatlipoca (*ibid.*: 171). Tezcatlipoca was further honored with severed heads on skull racks during the ceremonies of the 5th *veintena* called Toxcatl (*ibid.*: 68).

While Sahagún makes no mention of the skull rack in his description of the ceremonies that honor Teteoinnan or Toci and other earth-fertility goddesses that occur in the 11th *veintena* (Ochpaniztli), page 13 of the Codex Borbonicus illustrates the goddess Tlazolteotl (Goddess of Birth and Sin) wearing a human skin Xipe Totec fashion and associated with a god, probably Tezcatlipoca, in a vulture disguise. In the lower right corner of this panel there is a skull rack on a stepped platform, and next to it is a vessel containing a human heart and a severed head (Fig. 23*c*). Tlazolteotl is also associated with a severed head on page 48 of the Codex Borgia (Fig. 31*c*).

Besides these regular religious ceremonial displays of severed heads, skull racks were also added to during noncalendric rituals such as the dedication of new temple structures and probably in pre- and post-battle ceremonies. We are uninformed in any of the early descriptions of Tlatelolco-Tenochtitlan or other cities whether or not skull racks were associated with any of the various minor temples that were scattered throughout the *calpulli* or wards of the city.

The statements of Motolinía and Córdova describing possible Post-Classic head-shrinking practices have already been presented. However, we have yet to deal fully with our most revealing sources of insight into the many aspects of the Post-Classic head complex—the native documents or codices of both pre- and post-Conquest manufacture. While evidence for the practice of head-shrinking is not lacking, it is not the best understood aspect of this ritual complex.

To my knowledge, nowhere in the literature has anyone discussed, in this respect, the important sequence in the pre-Conquest Codex Fejérváry-Mayer (1901) which runs on the lower portion of pages 38 through 43. Illustrated there

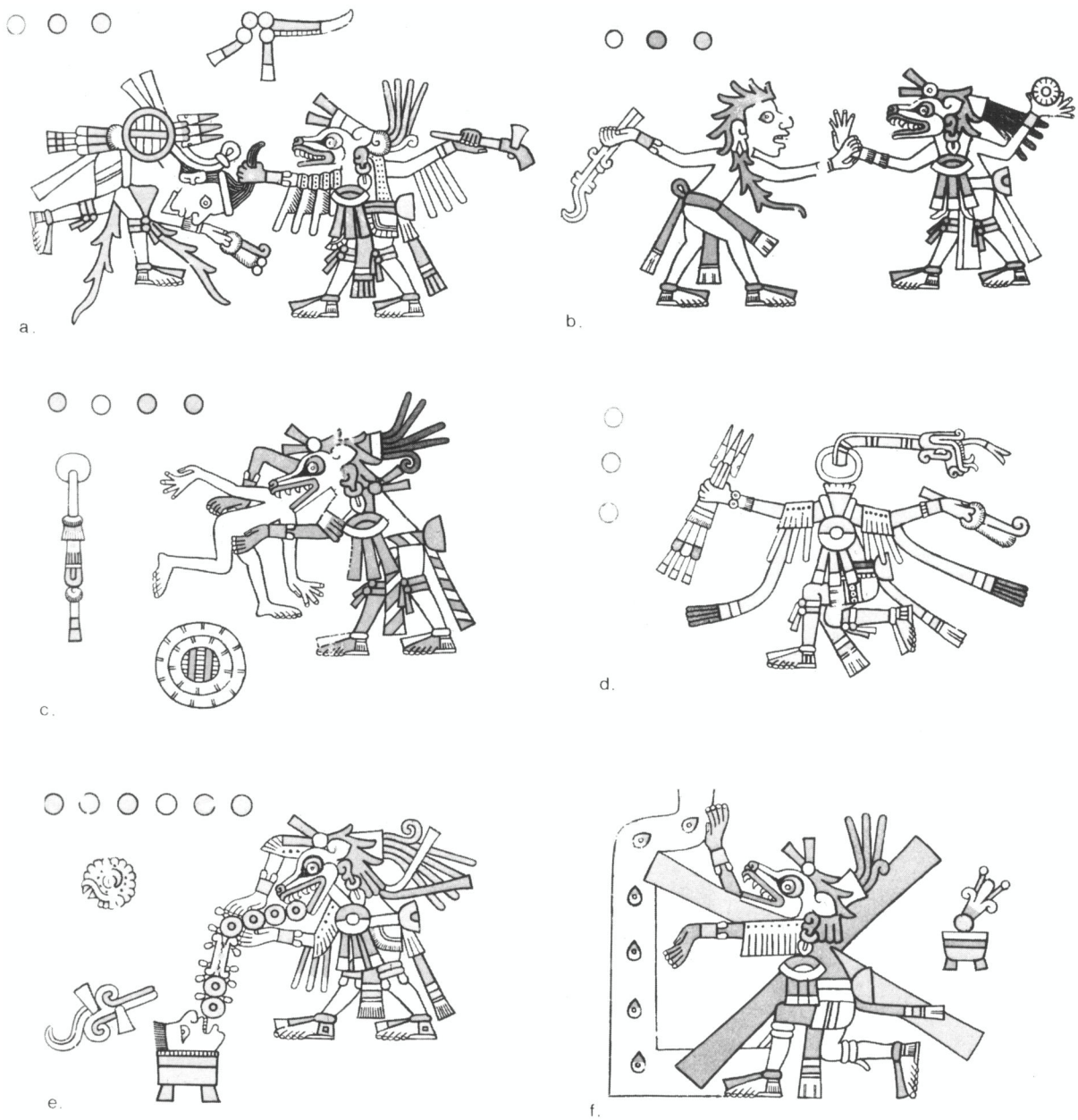


Fig. 24 Ritual combat and possible head-shrinking scenes from Codex Fejérváry-Mayer: *a.* p. 38; *b.* p. 39; *c.* p. 40; *d.* p. 41; *e.* p. 42, Opossum God performing a head ritual; *f.* p. 43, Opossum God ascending path to star-sky.

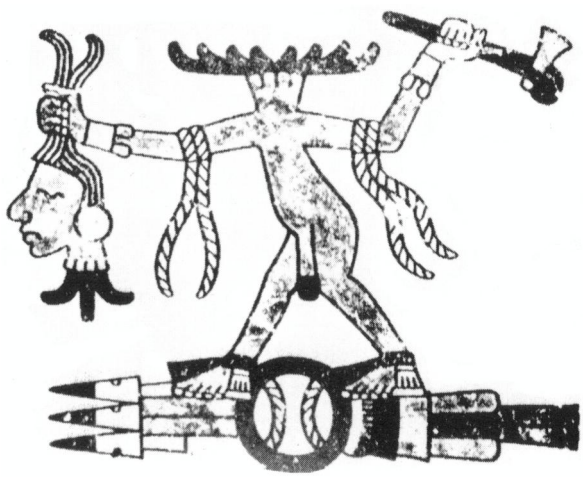


Fig. 25 (left) Decapitated gladiatorial combatant. Codex Laud, p. 24, Kingsborough numeration.

Fig. 26 (below) Maya head-shrinking ceremony. Codex Dresden, p. 34.

Fig. 27 (opposite) Possible head-shrinking ceremony, ceramic figurine group from Tehuántepec, Oaxaca. Museo Frissell, Mitla, Oaxaca. Photograph by the author.

is a battle between an ax-wielding opossum warrior or god and an uncostumed warrior who carries an *atlatl* (spearthrower), darts, and a shield. In my paper on the "cabecitas colosales" (Moser n.d.) I erroneously identified this personage as a "Coyote Warrior," but the eye markings and tail suggest he is an opossum as Seler identified him (1939a, IV: 20). On page 40 of the codex the Opossum God defeats and beheads his opponent. The round object in this scene suggests a shield or a gladiatorial stone like that used during the gladiator sacrifices held during the Tlacaxipehualiztli ceremonies in honor of Xipe Totec. This is followed on page 41 by a strange scene where either the Opossum God dances headless or his victim dons the insignia of the

Opossum God while retaining his own *atlatl* and darts (Fig. 24*a-d*). In the Codex Laud (Fig. 25; 1961: 38) a similar scene shows a naked man standing on a gladiatorial stone, with an ax in one hand and his own decapitated head held by the hair in the other. On page 42 of the Fejérváry-Mayer the Opossum God reappears performing a ceremony over the head of his victim, which rests face up in a polychrome slab-legged pot. As part of the ceremony he seems to be pouring hot stones and bone ash into the head skin in much the same manner as the process of curing and shrinking carried out by the South American Jívaro head-hunters (Fig. 24*e*). Finally, on page 43 the Opossum God, in direct association with the red-and-blue crossroads symbol of the Merchant God and God of Travelers, seems to ascend into the night sky as indicated by star-eyes (Fig. 24*f*). The nocturnal habits of the opossum (*tlaquatl* in Nahuatl; *och* in Yucatec Maya) align this god with the other night deities associated with the Lunar Goddess, Venus, the ballgame, and decapitation. Of this animal Seler (1939a, IV: 21) notes: "the fact that the mother carries the still immature young in the pouch and the numerous progeny which is the rule with these animals, made the opossum the type of woman in childbirth, and an important medicine among the Mexicans. Pulverized opossum tail was given to a pregnant woman when the ordinary means to accomplish birth did not suffice."

Only two other representations are known that can be interpreted as possible examples of head-shrinking ceremonies. One occurs on page 34 of the Maya Codex Dresden (Fig. 26). Here the head appears to be undergoing some sort of ritual, possibly in preparation for shrinking. Copal incense is being burned while priests play flutes and shake rattles. The second example is a clay figurine group (Fig. 27) from the Isthmus of Tehuántepec and now in the Frissell Mu-

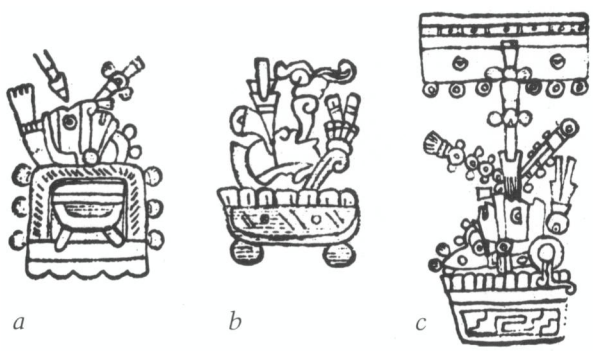


Fig. 28 Severed heads in ceramic vessels: *a.* Codex Cospi, p. 6; *b.* Codex Vaticanus 3773, p. 6; *c.* Codex Borgia, p. 6.

Fig. 29 The Merchant God being cooked in an *olla*. Codex Borgia, p. 46 (after Nowotny 1961: Pl. 26).

seum in Mitla, Oaxaca. Here again, a priest is shaking a rattle in front of a head that rests in a pot.

Decapitated warriors' heads set in bowls occur in most codices. It seems probable that these are being cooked so that the flesh can be removed, as Landa described for the Maya. Examples can be found on pages 6 of the Codex Vaticanus 3773, the Codex Cospi (Bologna), and the Codex Borgia (Fig. 28*a-c*). Numerous scenes occur in these codices showing whole bodies cooking in large *ollas* (Fig. 29). Pages 77 to 79 of the Codex Vaticanus 3773 show two of the five Cihuatateo goddesses making auto-sacrificial blood offerings to skulls resting in vessels (Seler 1963, II: 75, Figs. 59c,e). Seler's Tlamani

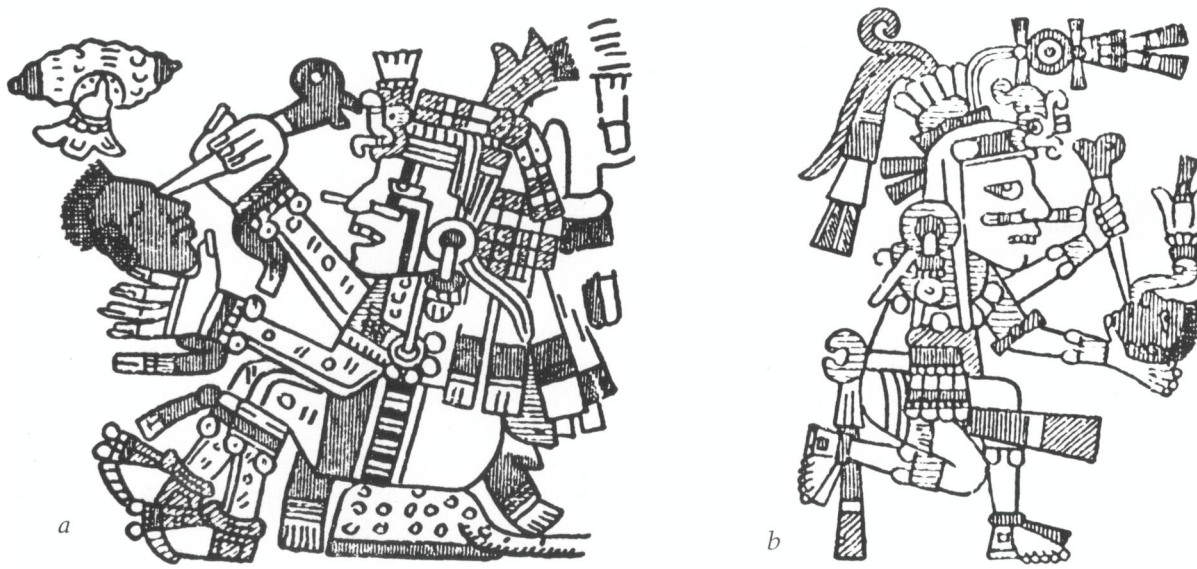


Fig. 30 Centeotl, the Maize God, using a bone awl on severed heads: *a.* Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, p. 23; *b.* Codex Vaticanus 3773, p. 33 (after Seler 1963, I: Figs. 417, 416).

of the four directions and the center of the celestial universe are frequently shown using a bone awl on a small head or skull (Fig. 30*a-b*). Thompson (1966) has pointed out the obvious merchant and traveler aspects of these gods. Page 1 of the Fejérváry-Mayer (Pl. XV), which illustrates the four divisions of the world, shows the Death God Mictlantecuhtli tending a cacao tree. In the space between the right and upper divisions there is a bleeding severed head, probably that of Tezcatlipoca. Frequently severed heads or skins are presented as offerings at temples (Fig. 31*a-e*). An actual act of decapitation can be seen on pages 18 and 58 of the Codex Borgia (Fig. 32*a-b*). In both cases the nocturnal realm of the Lunar Goddess, in the form Seler (1963, II: 149-72) identifies as Xochiquetzal, is being described.

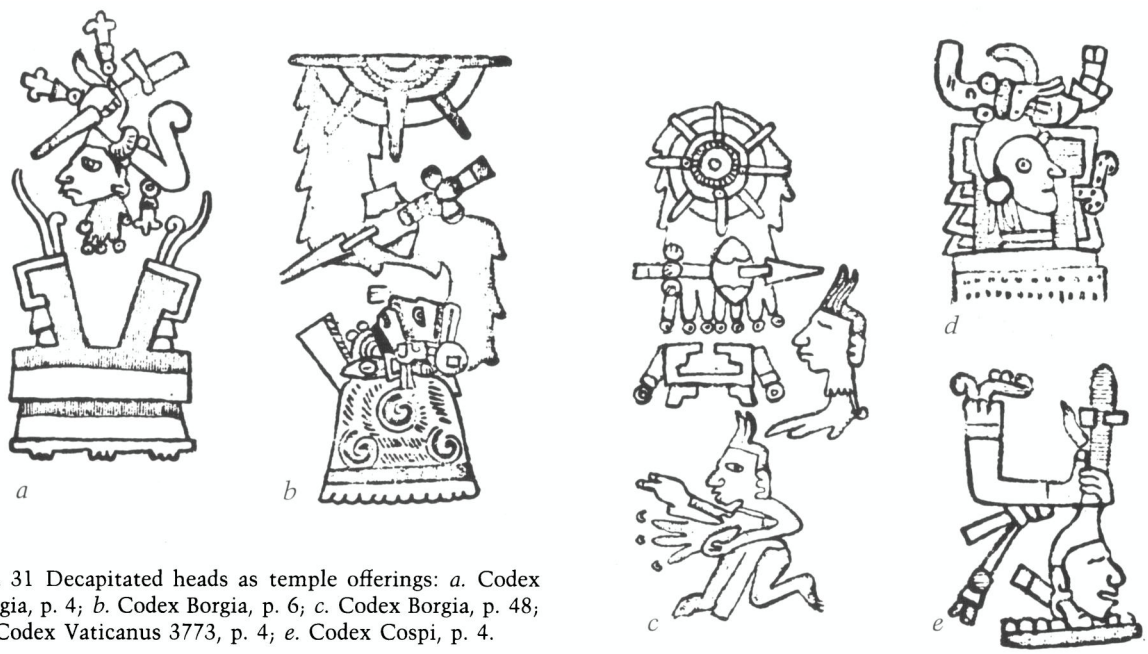
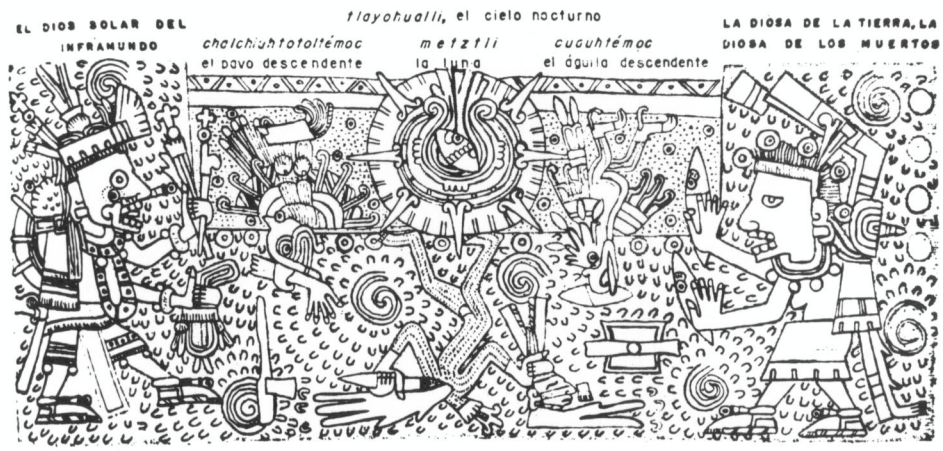


Fig. 31 Decapitated heads as temple offerings: *a.* Codex Borgia, p. 4; *b.* Codex Borgia, p. 6; *c.* Codex Borgia, p. 48; *d.* Codex Vaticanus 3773, p. 4; *e.* Codex Cospi, p. 4.

Decapitation and trophy heads seem to be mainly associated with night deities such as the Bat God, the Opossum God, the Jaguar, the Lunar Goddess, and the Planet Venus. Since the ballgame is directly related to the continuous cycle and conflict between Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca, the Lunar Goddesses and the Solar God, and worldly creation and destruction, it is also associated with decapitation, as we have seen in the stone reliefs from Izapa, Cotzumalhuapa, El Tajín, and Chichén Itzá. Seler (1939b: 15) and others have interpreted the ballgame or *tlachtli* as a ceremonial ritual representing the cyclic disappearance and resurgence of the moon and the planet Venus. The frequent depiction in the codices of the ballcourt in two or four colors suggests the passage of heavenly bodies from the day sky to the nocturnal half of the universe and vice versa. Xolotl, twin of Quetzalcoatl, is usually designated as the god of the *tlachtli.* The dualism of the ballgame probably also entered into the ritual cycles of planting and harvesting, and many aspects of the agricultural gods are associated with the ballcourt and decapitation (*ibid.*: 1-16).

At dawn of the last day of the 15th *veintena,* Panquetzaliztli, during ceremonies in honor of Huitzilopochtli, a priest impersonating the god



a

b

Fig. 32 Human decapitations: *a.* Auto-decapitation. Codex Borgia, p. 18 (Seler 1963, Appendix); *b.* Xochiquetzal (?) decapitating a warrior. Codex Borgia, p. 58 (Seler 1963).

Paynal slew four slaves—two honoring the god Amapan, two honoring the god Uapatzan—in the "god's ball court" (*Teotlachtli*) which was found in the courtyard below the temple of Huitzilopochtli. When they had slain them, he then dragged them about the ballcourt. "It was as if he painted it with their blood" (Sahagún 1950-70, III: 27, 134). Though Sahagún does not say so, it is likely that these sacrifices were decapitated and their heads later displayed on the skull rack.

Central to the theme of Aztec cosmology are the Earth Goddesses, especially Coatlicue, mother to the Sun, the Moon, and the Stars. The large stone statue of her in the National Museum, Mexico City, presents her with a headless body, her head replaced with two serpent heads. Hearts, hands, and a skull form part of her necklace. The severed-head aspect of this goddess has been interpreted as an allusion to her lunar character (Seler 1939b: 9). Her daughter, Coyolxauhqui, the Moon, is supposed to have lost her head and been dismembered during a battle with Coatlicue's son, Huitzilopochtli, the God of War. This is most likely an allusion to the phases of the moon. The large bodiless stone head of Coyolxauhqui is often described as a severed head of the Moon Goddess (Westheim 1965: 226, Pls. 109, 110).

Many of the goddesses that Nicholson (1971: 420-2) has incorporated into the Teteoinnan–Earth-Mother complex can also be linked to ritual decapitation and head trophies. Sahagún (1950-70, III: 19, 111-2) describes that on the first day of the 11th *veintena*, called Ochpaniztli, a feast was celebrated to the "mother of the gods," Teteoinnan or Toci. A woman selected to impersonate Toci was taken at mid-

night to the temple where one of the priests "took her upon his back, shoulder against shoulder, and swiftly they struck off her head, and then they flayed her. And a stout youth put on her skin." Sahagún (*ibid*: 31, 143-4) also informs us that during the 17th *veintena* of the Aztec year, called Tititl, a feast was celebrated to honor the goddess Ilamatecuhtli (also called Tonan), "Our Mother." As part of this ceremony "they slew a woman [dressed in her likeness], and as soon as they had torn out her heart they struck off her head and performed a dance with it. . . . Then one of those who went adorned as a god took [it], and, [with him] foremost, carrying it by the hair, they performed a dance with it. He who bore it in his right hand guided [them], and he made the dance gestures with it." It is important to note here that following the slaying of the gladiatorial sacrifices during the 2nd *veintena,* called Tlacaxipehualiztli in honor of Xipe (another fertility god), "all severally took with them the head of a captive, a sacrificial victim, and therewith danced. This was called 'the dance with the severed heads' " (*mjtoa, motzontecomaitotia*) (*ibid.*: 53).

Numerous other earth-fertility goddesses of this group can be associated with decapitation. As we have seen, Tlazolteotl, Goddess of Filth, Sin, and Birth, appears in association with the skull rack and a severed head on page 13 of the Codex Borbonicus (Fig. 23*c*). Another important goddess of this complex was Xochiquetzal, a more youthful aspect of Toci, especially concerned with pregnancy, childbirth, and the young mother.

As Nicholson (1971: 421) points out, "The earth-mother goddesses seem to display close lunar connections." The case for this is quite strong, though this is essentially an inference of modern scholarship (e.g., Seler 1939b: 5-10; Thompson 1939: 129-30). Beyond a doubt the goddess Xochiquetzal is directly associated with the ballgame, pulque, and decapitation on page 19 of the Codex Borbonicus (Fig. 33) and on page 19 of the Codex Tonalamatl Aubin (Fig. 34). In both of these codices Xochiquetzal appears with a headdress consisting of a flower symbol, quetzal feathers, and a large bird head or mask on the back of her head.

I cannot agree with Seler (1902-23, III: 469; 1963, II: 233), however, when he identifies a goddess he calls "la diosa decapitada" as Xochiquetzal (Fig. 35*a-b*). This goddess with her hair wreathed by two entwined serpents is dismissed by Spranz (1964: 363-4) as a separate personage, and he does not identify her with any known goddess. Seler (1902-23, III: 461) distinguishes only two different goddesses who wear this headdress. One is the Pulque Goddess "Seven Tocalli" (Codex Nuttall, page 29) who can be distinguished by the rattlesnake tails on the serpents. In contrast the other, which he identifies as Xochiquetzal with two different day names—Lady 11 Serpent (Fig. 35*a*) and Lady 9 Reed (Fig. 36*a-b*). — has entwined serpents with simple pointed tails.

Seler (*ibid.*: 466-7) argues that the day name 11 Serpent belongs in the nineteenth week (1 Eagle), whose patroness is Xochiquetzal (Codex Borbonicus, page 19). However, the day name 9 Reed belongs to the ninth week (1 Serpent) over which Xiuhtecuhtli (the Fire God) and Tlahuizalpantecuhtli (the divinity of the Morning Star) are regents (Codex Borbonicus, page 9). Seler associated Xochiquetzal with these two gods by arguing that they were also gods of war and that Xochiquetzal, as the patroness of prostitutes and the female companions of unmarried warriors, was therefore a female counterpart of Xiuhtecuhtli or at least honored at that time. Lady 9 Reed may be better identified on other grounds as Ilamatecuhtli, an aspect of the Earth-Mother complex and of Cihuacoatl. Among the significant indicators is the fire symbol that is attached to her necklace, a possible reference to her dual role within the Cihuacoatl complex as the wife or feminine counterpart of the "Old Fire God" (Krickeberg 1961: 142; Spranz 1964: 60). Sahagún (1950-70, III: 143), in describing the adornments of the impersonator of Ilamatecuhtli during the ceremonies (in which she was decapitated and her head held

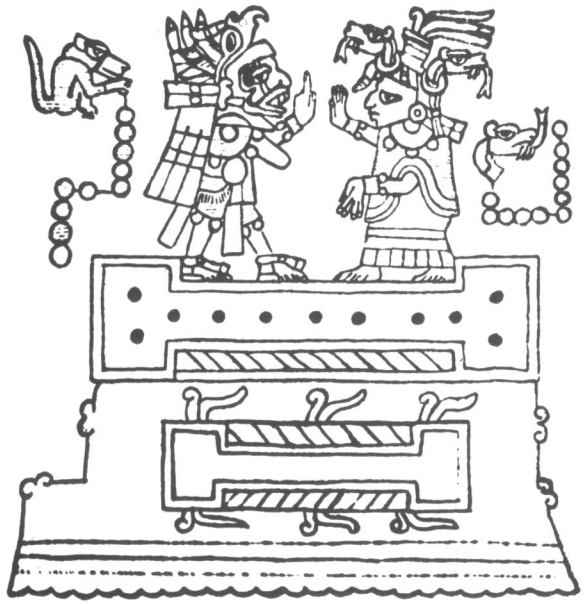
Fig. 33 Xochiquetzal in association with a ballcourt and a decapitated figure. Codex Borbonicus, p. 19 (Seler 1963, II: Fig. 286).

in a dance) of the 17th *veintena* (Tititl), remarks that she wore "a headdress with eagle feathers arrayed upon it, [which] consisted only of hair, twisted, arranged and well disposed, braided and intertwined with itself. The headdress was called *tzompilinalli.*" Also she wore a "star skirt . . . bedight with small sea shells" not unlike the *quechiquemitl* shown in front of Lady 9 Reed on page 28 of the Vindobonensis (Fig. 36*b*).

Seler may be correct in identifying Lady 11 Serpent as Xochiquetzal in one guise or another. Where she appears on page 3 of the Codex Nuttall (Fig. 35*c*) in association with an opossum and three women, standing on a ballcourt from which flames sprout, she wears the eye and nose pendant that are symbols of Tlaloc, the rain deity. This may be a reference to the 13th *veintena* (Hueypachtli) during which the Tlaloques and Xochiquetzal were honored (Nicholson 1971: Table 4). Like Xochiquetzal on page 19 of the Borbonicus, the goddess with the intertwined serpent headdress and severed neck appears unnamed on pages 13, 20, and 22 (Fig. 35*d*) of the Vindobonensis in association with an opossum, ballcourts, *hule* or rubber, copal, pulque, and maguey plants with attached headless bodies or severed heads. Again this may be a reference to activities that occurred during the Hueypachtli ceremonies when ritual drunkenness was allowed and Xochiquetzal's impersonator was sacrificed.

Incidentally, the decapitated unnamed goddesses shown in the same context as in Fig. 35*d* on pages 13 and 20 of the Vindobonensis lack the intertwined serpents in their hair while all the other details are the same. A goddess with a twisted and braided hair style lacking the serpents appears in the lower right square of page 58 of the Codex Borgia (Fig. 32*b*). She is shown using a stone knife to decapitate a victim who is then devoured by Mictlantecuhtli, the God of Death. Associated with this act is the *tochtli,* or rabbit, a common lunar symbol. Braided and intertwined hair effects are worn by numerous women of importance in many codices, including Lady 6 Monkey in the Codex Selden II. The only identifiable male god that wears this same headdress is Quetzalcoatl, appearing this way in

Fig. 34 Xochiquetzal in association with a ballcourt and a decapitated figure. Codex Tonalamatl Aubin, p. 19 (Seler 1963, II: Fig. 287).



a

b

c

d

Fig. 35 *a.* Lady 11 Serpent with interwoven serpent headdress confronting Lord 10 Lizard. Codex Vindobonensis, p. 3. *b.* Lady 11 Serpent with severed head of a woman on her back. Codex Vindobonensis, p. 28. *c.* Lady 11 Serpent with her head severed and accompanied by the Opossum God. Codex Nuttall, p. 3. *d.* A "Decapitated Goddess" with the entwined serpent headdress. Codex Vindobonensis, p. 22 (See Seler 1902-23, III: 462-4, Abb. 4-7*a*).

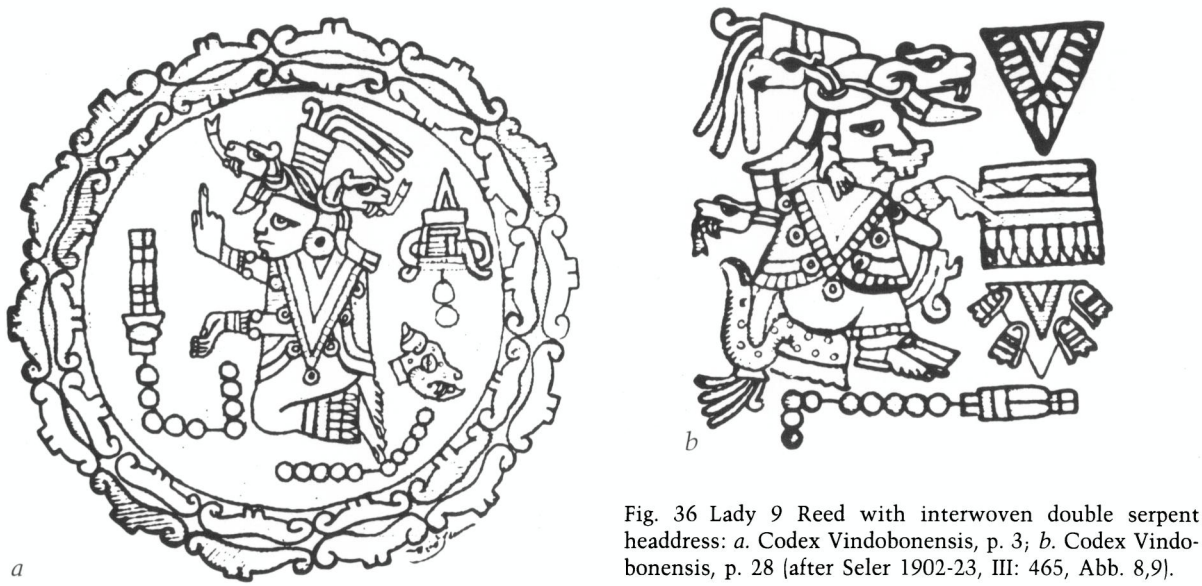


Fig. 36 Lady 9 Reed with interwoven double serpent headdress: *a.* Codex Vindobonensis, p. 3; *b.* Codex Vindobonensis, p. 28 (after Seler 1902-23, III: 465, Abb. 8,9).

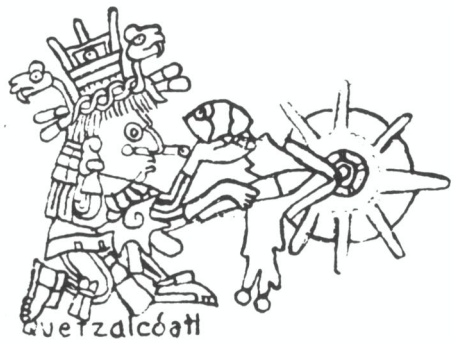
the Codex Borgia on page 40 (Fig. 37) and in the Vaticanus 3773 on page 50. A few male lords, unidentifiable as gods, wear this style of headdress, such as Lord 4 Serpent on page 30 of the Vindobonensis who appears with the symbols of the sun and the earth monster (Tlaltecuhtli). On page 69 of Codex Nuttall, Lord 9 Deer can be observed atop a place glyph, bearing on his back the severed head of the goddess I have suggested may be Ilamatecuhtli (Fig. 38).

Further support for this interpretation is lacking at this time, but I do believe a good case has been presented to demonstrate that Seler's "decapitated goddess" is more complex than was thought. This complexity, her relationship to the Old Fire God, the ballcourt, the moon, and the rain deity, Tlaloc, lends weight to the premise that she was an older, more established goddess than Xochiquetzal, and was either Tonan, "Our Mother", or Ilamatecuhtli.

Another goddess belonging to the Teteoinnan–Earth-Mother complex was Itzpapalotl (Obsidian Butterfly). On page 15 of the Codex Tonalamatl Aubin (Fig. 39) she appears in association with maguey plants, decapitated quail, and a decapitated man.

Severed heads play a frequent role in rituals surrounding the planting of maize and beans in myth and pictorial codices, and therefore with fertility, birth, and death. In other words, decapitation can be related, directly or indirectly, to nearly all aspects of the annual magico-religious agricultural cycle. Acosta Saignes (1950) ties decapitation in with the Tlacaxipehualiztli complex of rituals that surrounded Xipe Totec and the new growth ceremonies. Sahagún (1950-70, III: 15) reports that during the 8th *veintena,* Xilonen, the goddess of tender maize, was ritually sacrificed in the same manner as Toci during the 11th *veintena* (see Table I). "When she reached the top [of the pyramid of the temple of Cinteotl], one [of the priests] took her upon his back, shoulder against shoulder; and in this position, they struck off her head and then tore out her heart and offered it to the sun." It is pertinent to note here that on page 23 of the Codex Fejérváry-Mayer and on page 33 of the Codex Vaticanus 3773, the Maize God Centeotl is shown using a bone awl on severed heads (Fig. 30*a-b*).

Further, Teteoinnan or Toci, as we have seen, was sacrificed in this same manner as part of the harvest festival during the Ochpaniztli *veintena* and, in the manner of Xipe, her thigh



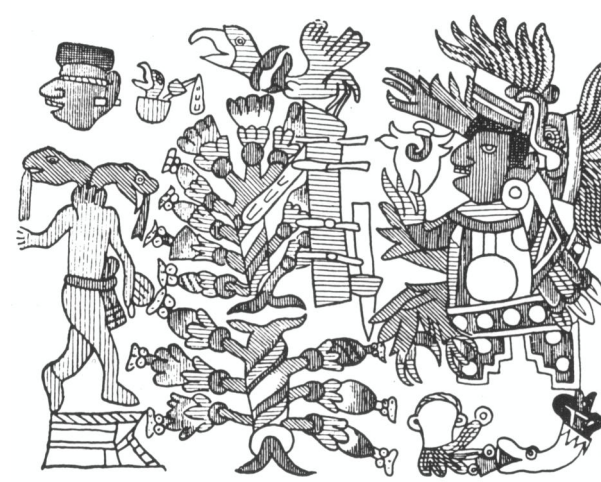
skin was worn as a face mask by a priest following her sacrifice. Seler's interpretation (1939b: 6-7) of the flaying and wearing of the sacrificial victim's skin as symbolically representing new growth and fertility has been generally accepted by most authorities. Something of this is recognized in the Quiché Maya myths surrounding Hunahpú and Xbalanqué in which these god-heroes, like Quetzalcoatl, descend into the earth, defeat the forces of darkness and re-emerge as the Sun and Venus. This has been interpreted as an allegory of the planting of grains of maize in the soil, their germination in this underworld, and finally their growth and flowering. A symbolic representation of this appears on page 37 of the Vindobonensis (Fig. 40) where a "tree of life" is shown growing from a severed head and giving birth to a man and a woman.

Other vegetation deities associated with decapitation are the God and Goddess of Maguey. As we have already seen, pulque and the maguey plant are closely linked with the goddess who wears the intertwined serpent headdress, and Seler has identified the Lady 7 Tocalli on page 29 of the Codex Nuttall as a Pulque Goddess (Fig. 41). Both of these gods appear with severed heads on page 31 of the Vaticanus 3773, and Patecatl, the Pulque God, appears on page 13 of the Codex Borgia wearing a small human head as part of his headdress (Fig. 42). Again on page 57 of the Borgia, the Pulque God and Goddess are associated with the rabbit, symbol of the moon, and are shown with a skull

Fig. 37 (above, left) Quetzalcoatl with interwoven double serpent headdress. Codex Borgia, p. 40 (after Seler 1963, Appendix).

Fig. 38 (above, right) Lord 9 Deer wearing the severed head of the Earth Goddess with entwined double serpent headdress. Codex Nuttall, p. 69.

Fig. 39 (below) Itzpapalotl, Obsidian Butterfly, goddess of the fifteenth section of the Tonalpohualli. Codex Tonalamatl Aubin, p. 15 (Seler 1963, II: Fig. 266).



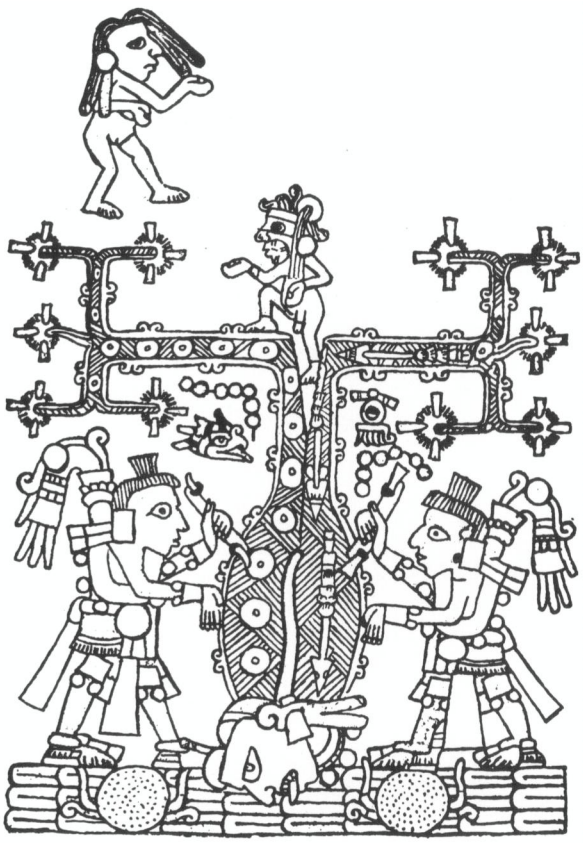


Fig. 40 "Tree of Life." Codex Vindobonensis, p. 37.

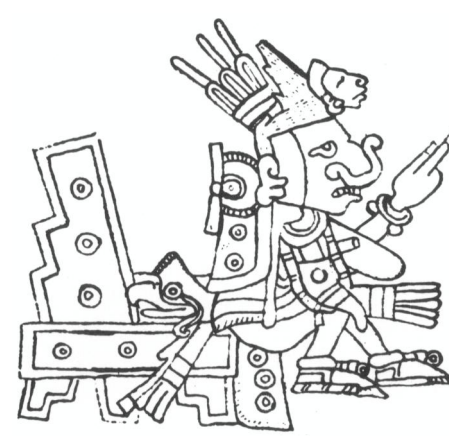
in an *olla*. Further examples, no doubt, could be pointed out, but to enumerate them all goes beyond the present needs of this paper. The above examples are sufficient to demonstrate the complexity and interdependency that existed within the cosmology of ancient Mesoamerica.

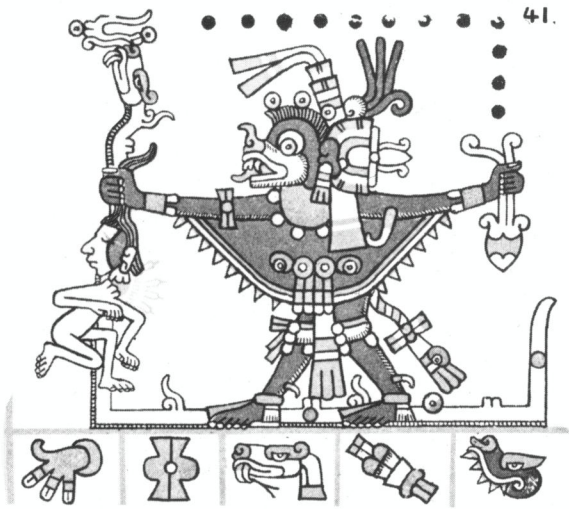
Before concluding this discussion, however, there are a few other gods not yet discussed that are equally important and can be related to aspects of decapitation practices.

Tlacatzinacantli, the Mexican Bat God, is another night deity that can be seen dancing with a human head and heart in the Codex Fejérváry-Mayer (Fig. 43*a*), the Borgia (Fig. 43*b*), and the Vaticanus 3773 (Fig. 43*c*). Sahagún (1950-70, III: 120) tells us that during the ceremonies honoring Tlamatzincatl during the 12th *veintena* (Teotleco), in which the Merchant God Yacatecuhtli and the Fire God Xiuhtecuhtli took part, a certain priest "[in the likeness of a] bat was there, [also] doing a dance; indeed [in an array] like a bat was he adorned. He had two gourd rattles which, one in each hand, he went rattling." Indeed, in the Codex Vaticanus, page 24, and in the Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, where this god or priest appears on page 41, he is accompanied by

Fig. 41 (above) Pulque Goddess, 7 House, with interwoven serpent headdress. Codex Nuttall, p. 29 (after Seler, 1902-23, III: 461, Abb. 3).

Fig. 42 (below) Patecatl, Pulque God, with small, possibly shrunken head on his headdress. Codex Borgia, p. 13 (Seler 1963, Appendix).





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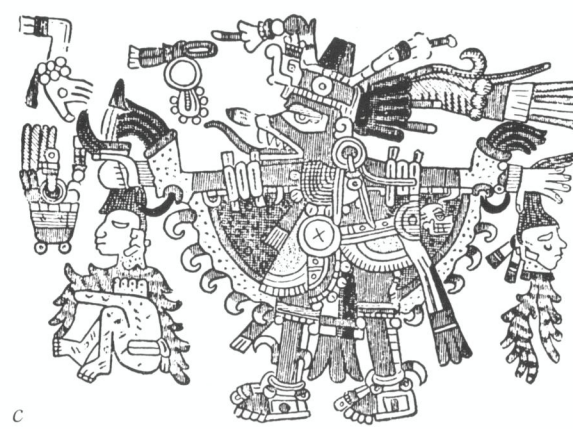


c

Fig. 43 Tlacatzinacantli, Bat God, with severed human heads: *a.* Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, p. 41; *b.* Codex Borgia, p. 49 (Seler 1963, II: Fig. 30); *c.* Codex Vaticanus 3773, p. 24 (Seler 1963, II: Fig. 28).

twelve dots which may indicate the Teotleco year segment. According to Seler (1939a, IV: 5), the bat (*zo'tz* in Maya; *tzinacautl* in Nahuatl; and *piquite zina* or *quiti piciña* in Zapotec) "has a special and very curious mythological significance. It is the c'ama-zo'tz (as it is called in the Quiche legend), the 'head-tearing-off-bat.' "

In chapter 10 of the second part of the Popol Vuh, the sacred book of the Quiché Maya, the adventures of Hunahpú and Xbalanqué (two ball-playing brothers threatened by the Lords of Xibalba in an underground evil region) are recited. During one episode (Recinos, Goetz, and Morley 1950: 148-50) they were required to enter, in turn, the House of Cold, the House of Fire, the House of Jaguars, and successfully survive the threats and dangers of these ordeals. However, in the House of Bats or "House of Camazotz" (the Death Bat, which was "a large animal, whose weapons for killing were like a dry point [fire-hardened point] and it was known that instantly those who came into their presence perished") the boys ran into trouble. "They [the boys] were in there, then, but they slept inside their blowguns. And they were not bitten by those who were in the house. . . . The bats were assembled in council all night, and flew about: *'Quilitz, quilitz,'* they said. . . . They stopped for a little while, however, and they did not move and were pressed against the end of the blowguns. . . . And as he [Hunahpú] wished very much to look out of the mouth of the blowgun, and wished to see if it had dawned, instantly Camazotz cut off his head and the body of Hunahpú was decapitated." Thus for the moment the brothers were undone and "they went

immediately to hang the head [of Hunahpú] in the ball-court by special order of Hun-Camé and Vucub-Camé, and all the people of Xibalba rejoiced for what had happened to the head of Hunahpú." Later Hunahpú regained his head and eventually the brothers tricked the lords of Xibalba into defeat. The story is believed to reflect the conquest of the Xibalba lords by the Quiché, probably during their emigration from northern Yucatán into central Yucatán and northern Guatemala during the fourteenth or fifteenth century.

Seler also notes that in the Maya area "bat" is the name of one of the 18 *uinal* or months of twenty days. In the month of Zotz, according to Bishop Landa (Tozzer 1941: 156), the owners of hives of honey prepared to celebrate their festival in Tzec, the following *uinal.* This preparation consisted mostly of fasting. Tozzer (*ibid.*: 156, fn. 793) further notes that during the *uinal* Zotz "rites were undertaken in behalf of the bee gods and to obtain an abundance of honey which was used as food, in the preparation of *balche* and in trade." Here we can see that the

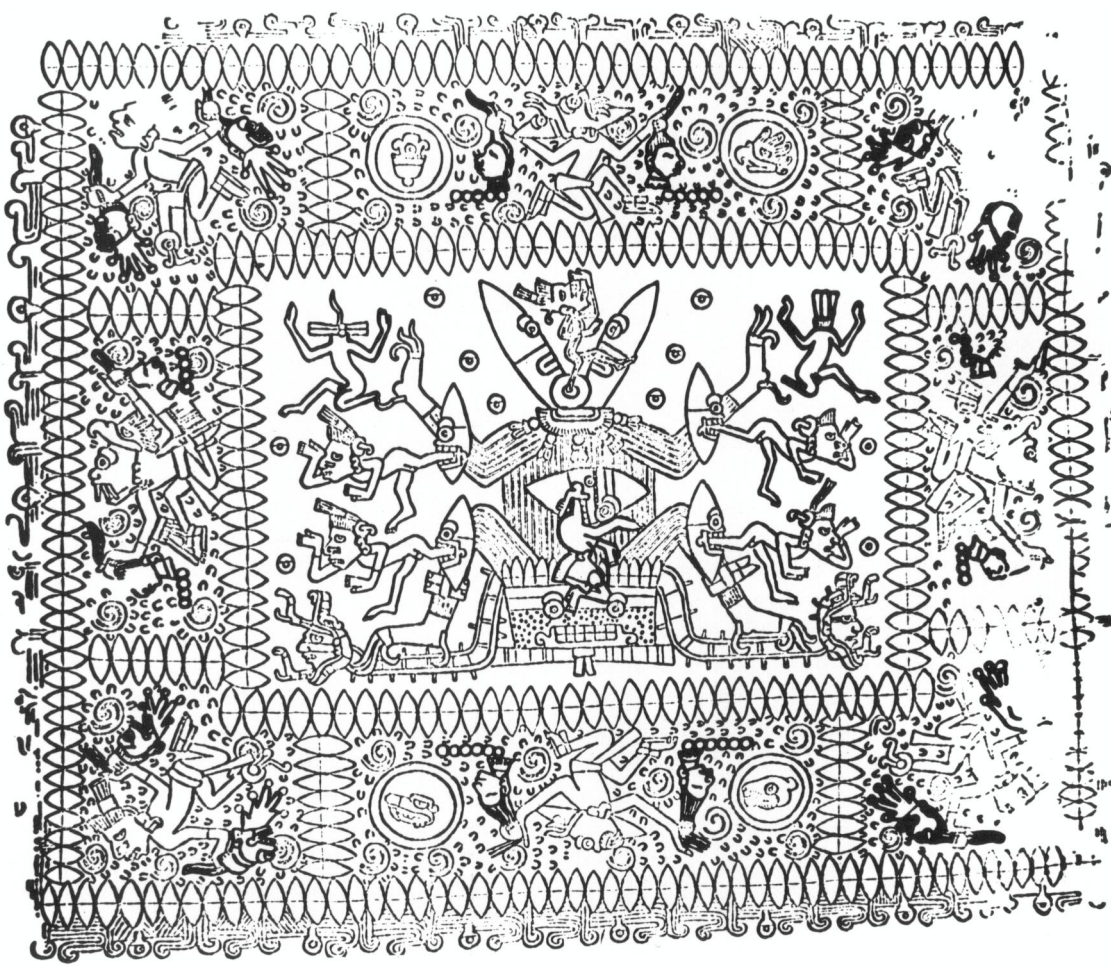


Fig. 44 The "Nocturnal Underworld" of severed heads and decapitated bodies. Codex Borgia, p. 32 (after Nowotny 1961: Pl. 14).

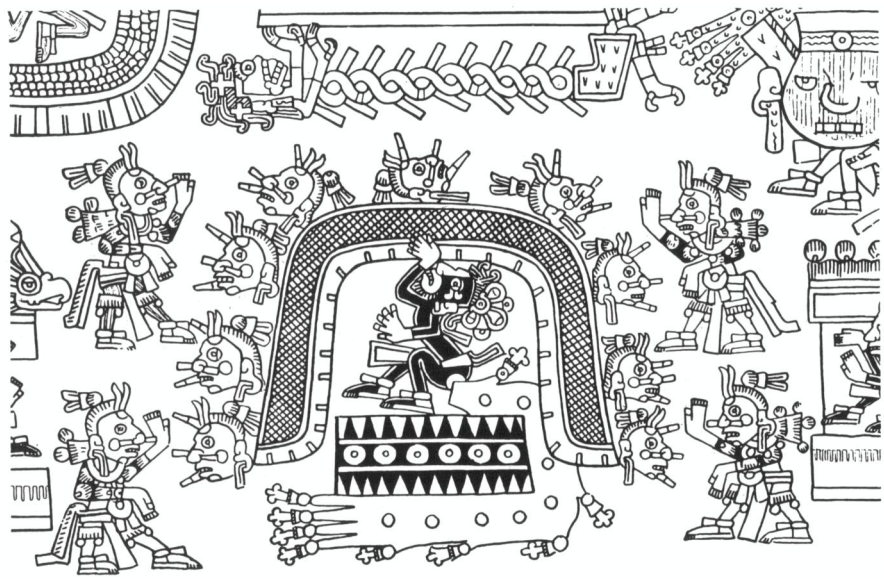


Fig. 45 Detail of page 45 of the Codex Borgia (Nowotny 1961: Pl. 25).

bat is twice related to merchants and trade. Also Tzinacantepec, or Bat Place, is listed on pages 9 and 15 of the Codex Mendoza as one of the cities of the cacao country in the province of Soconusco (Seler 1939a, IV: 5).

The representation of severed heads on Post-Classic pottery is relatively rare for the Central Highlands. However, on the codex-style tripod *olla* from Nochixtlan (Pl. XIV) the god Ehecatl Quetzalcoatl can be seen wearing a jaguar-skin helmet and offering a severed head with a flower-glyph headdress to a *cipactli.* Paddock (1966) illustrates in Plate 31 a polychrome tripod vessel from Yagul with numerous faces and possible severed heads which he interprets as representing Mixcoatl.

Of all the codices, the Borgia depicts the greatest number of decapitations, severed heads, and trophy heads or skulls. At least 33 severed heads can be counted throughout the manuscript, with 16 occurring on Page 32 (Fig. 44). According to Seler (1963, II: 15-20) this page illustrates the Nocturnal Underworld in the House of the Stone Knives through which the planet Venus passes during the time when it is invisible between appearances as the morning and evening stars. On page 45 of the Borgia (Fig. 45) a god kneels on six painted skulls and below on this same page, which is concerned with the heaven of the Warriors of the East, there is a skyarch with nine painted heads attached to it.

Seler (*ibid.*) argues from his interpretation of pages 32 and 44 of the Codex Borgia that the severed heads, skinned heads (skulls with flesh), and red-and-yellow skulls are associated with the different celestial directions of the realms of the Moon Goddess and the Black Tezcatlipoca, both Night Gods. The severed heads, he feels, correspond to the Morning Star (Venus-Quetzalcoatl) or to the stars in general. Howard Leigh (1958) arrived independently at this same interpretation in his attempt to explain the glyphs on the Observatory structure at Monte Albán as astronomical notations rather than historical ones. Caso (1947: 27), however, has interpreted the placement of a human face or head upside down (e.g., Fig. 6), with its eyes closed, as a sign that the *cacique* represented

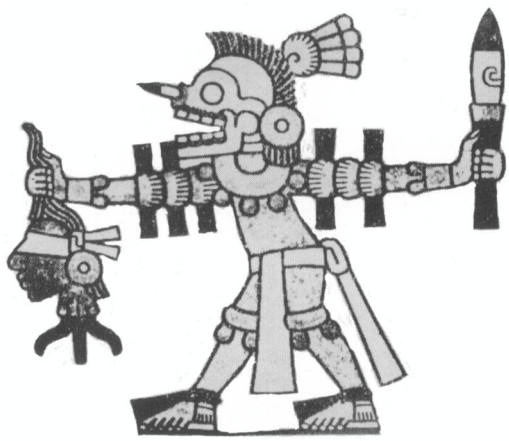


Fig. 46 Mictlantecuhtli, God of Death, with a severed head and a sacrificial flint knife. Codex Laud, p. 20, Kingsborough numeration.

had been conquered and killed. Seler (1939c: 79) may have provided us with a reconciliation of these seemingly opposed interpretations when he pointed out that "to the Mexicans the star-gods were the spirits of the dead living in the sky, especially fallen heroes or warriors slain on the offering stone." Assuming that central ideological concepts were shared, or at least similar, might we not expect that the execution or sacrifice of an important conquered *cacique* or chief was carried out on special dates of great astronomical significance, and that the religious, calendrical significance and the historical aspects were merged in the stone carvings of Monte Albán?

Finally, as might be expected, another important night deity, Mictlantecuhtli, the God of Death, is frequently shown with severed heads as, for example, on page 20 of the Codex Laud (Fig. 46) where he is shown with a sacrificial stone knife in one hand and a severed human head in the other. Numerous other instances could be cited here but two further examples should adequately demonstrate this connection. On page 52 of the Codex Borgia (Fig. 47), in the upper right corner of the section describing the South Region of the world, the God and Goddess of Death are shown embracing. Just above them there is a spine-covered tree on which hang the headless bodies of a man and an eagle. Lastly, we have already seen the Death God linked with Tlacatzinacantli, the Bat God, in the Borgia (Fig. 43*b*). Also it would appear that the decapitated head or facial skin of a sacrificed warrior or noble was often attached to the exterior of his mortuary bundle (Fig. 48*a-c*). Though these are usually interpreted as imitative masks, I feel that their representation in the codices is far more like severed heads or skins than masks. Interestingly, in the Laud, a head and two skulls mark the location of a tomb on page 21 (Fig. 49).

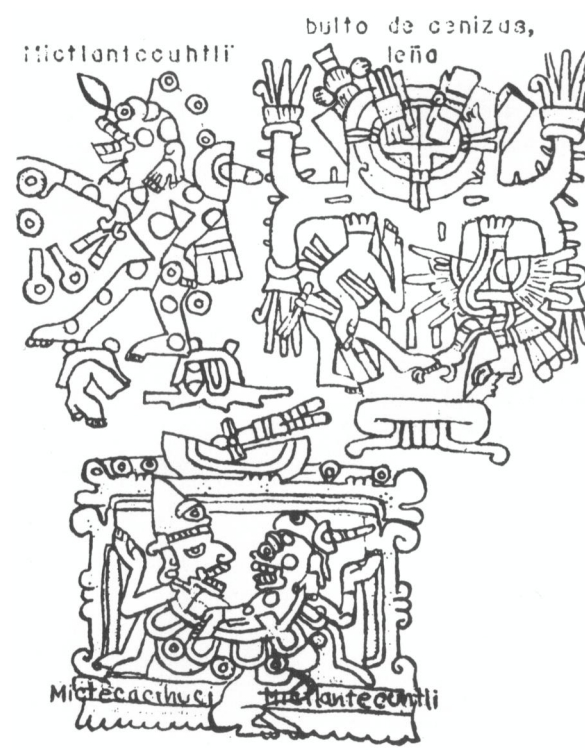


Fig. 47 God and Goddess of Death associated with decapitated humans and an eagle. Codex Borgia, p. 52 (after Seler 1963, Appendix).

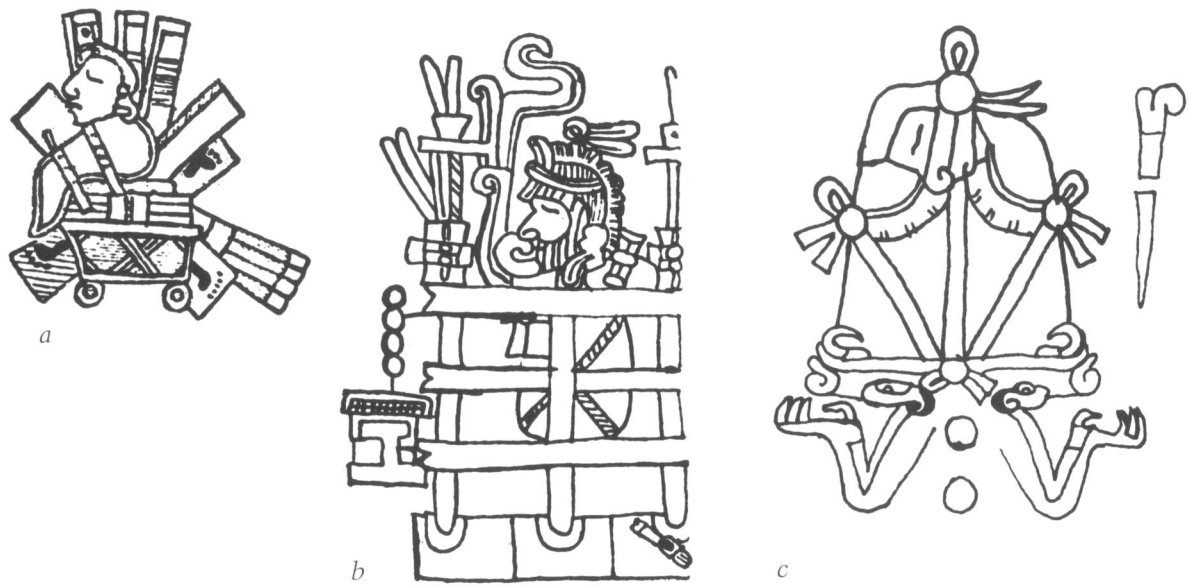


Fig. 48 (above) Possible decapitated heads attached to mortuary bundles: *a.* Codex Borgia, p. 14; *b.* Codex Nuttall, p. 20; *c.* Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, p. 40.

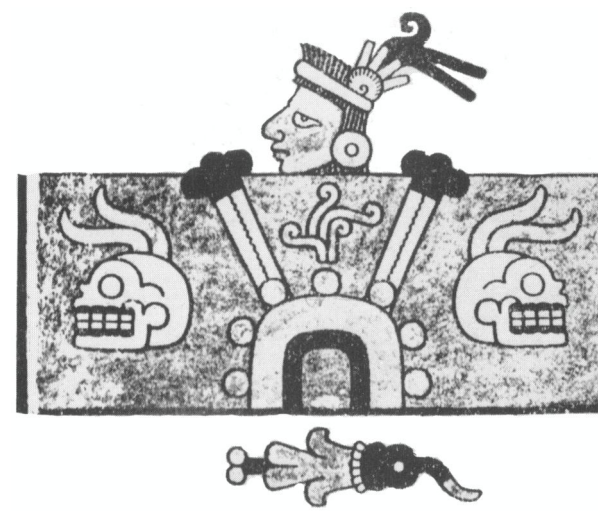


Fig. 49 (right) Decapitated human head marking the location of a tomb. Codex Laud, p. 21, Kingsborough numeration.

CONCLUSIONS

The foregoing completes the description of archaeological and ethnohistorical evidence of human decapitation in ancient Mesoamerica. One immediately evident fact is that examples occur in nearly every major culture area within Mesoamerica. In examining the weight or relative intensity of the temporal distribution (see Table II) I am unable to place any great stress upon the *prima facie* evidence. The overwhelming examples in the late pictorial documents of the Mexican central plateau and the Gulf Coast probably unduly bias the sample and as post-Contact descriptions of the northern and southern frontiers indicate, the ritual treatment of heads was probably evenly distributed over all of Mesoamerica by the early fifteenth century. This observable increase attests to the great stress that growing urban population put on the state to expand its sphere of influence from which it could obtain food and luxury products in the form of tribute and trade. Warfare in Post-Classic times can be viewed as an ongoing adaptive mechanism to meet this stress in a direct manner. Normally maladaptive or dysfunctional activities, such as warfare and sacrifice, can be seen as functioning to lower the male breeding population, and thereby the total population, as well as increasing the input of tribute goods in this case. As one component of warfare, the status incurred from the taking of head trophies and other coup practices tends to further reinforce group cohesion and the need for achievement within the group or society.

The apparent prominence of the highland Chiapas and Guatemalan area during the Formative and Early Classic is almost surely deceptive due to the comparatively large amount of attention and archaeological work carried out there. Still, as the data stand, admittedly inadequate for a comprehensive analysis, it appears that the practice of using severed heads, and probably femurs as well, taken from former chiefs, priests, and important personages as relics, had its origin in the Uaxactún–Tikal area during the Formative. At least it is in this area that the physical evidence has been preserved and recovered most often. Another Formative center to which this trait can be attributed is the Izapa–El Jobo region of western coastal Guatemala and Chiapas. There the stone reliefs reflect only evidence of battle scenes and decapitation of captives. A third possible early zone is the Olmec Gulf Coast region where one can find both warlike aspects (such as in Stela 3, La Venta, and Stela A, Tres Zapotes) and the authoritarian attitudes expressed in the veneration and position afforded the monumental stone heads at La Venta, Tres Zapotes, and San Lorenzo.

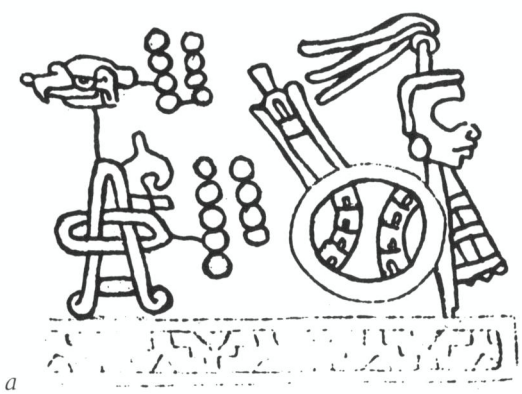
During the Classic there is a markedly increased emphasis on ritual decapitation of both the war-orientated and authoritarian type among the Maya, especially in the Guatemala and Chiapas highlands. Urns from Monte Albán establish our earliest link between decapitation and a recognizable Mesoamerican god. Significantly this link is with Xipe, a god closely related to the agricultural planting cycle. The Late Classic murals at Bonampak and the reliefs at Palenque and Yaxchilán suggest that the display or wearing of head trophies, shrunken or not, was limited to persons of high rank and prestige and to specialized groups like the heralds or horn-blowers in the Bonampak battle scene. The lack of evidence for decapitation or trophy heads from Classic Teotihuacán is rather curious, since we know there was close contact through trade relations with the Maya and the Zapotecs.

The association of decapitation with agriculture and the ballgame may actually have been present from the Early Classic or before, but there is no definite evidence to that effect. The Late Classic Veracruz representations of decapitated ballplayers and severed heads on *palmas* mark the first direct association between these two early Mesoamerican traits. I have already

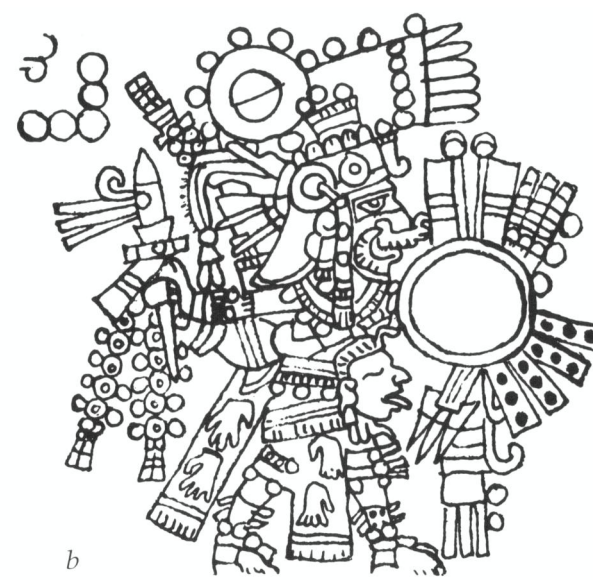
suggested that Pipil movements after A.D. 650 and gradual cross-culturalization between the Tajín-Totonac *yugo-hacha-palma* complex and the highland Maya practice of decapitation probably were due to trade-linked exchanges between these two important cultures extending over several centuries. It is likely that a larger sample of Formative and Early Classic sites in the Huastec-Totonac region would provide evidence for an even earlier association between these two ceremonial activities; however, for the present we are limited to available data.

By the Early Post-Classic, at any rate, all of the major aspects of the head cult were present, and it can be considered a truly pan-Mesoamerican trait. From the more abundant available evidence of this period it is still more apparent that there were basically two underlying socio-religious expressions of the severed-head complex. On the one hand, specially treated heads, facial skins, and skulls were utilized by individuals to display power and ability in war, leadership, and authority (Fig. 50*a-b*), and possibly to identify personal mortuary bundles. All other head-cult activities appear to be community orientated within the magico-religious structure. Skull racks and temples built with skulls mounted in the facade or roof were constructed for the religious good of everyone. The ceremonial ballgame and planting ceremonies were both activities of concern to the future and well-being of the community as a whole and were probably well attended. The installation of new rulers, the dedication of new temples, and the capture of warriors for sacrifice were also community-centered activities. It is noteworthy that in the Bonampak murals not just anyone wears trophy heads; only the specialized heralds and one extremely high-ranking chief wear them, suggesting that their very nature was a religious one, even in relation to warfare. Figure 40, from page 37 of the Codex Vindobonensis, demonstrates in a beautiful fashion the strong conceptualism linking agriculture, fertility, birth, and the ballgame with severed heads and decapitation.

Ritual decapitation was the main means of sacrifice of the women who impersonated Xilonen (the tender maize goddess) and Teteoinnan-Toci. Ilamatecuhtli-Tonan was first sacrificed by removal of her heart; then her head was severed and used in a ritual dance. The festival of Xilonen is usually interpreted as a new-crop ritual, while that of Teteoinnan is viewed as a



a



b

Fig. 50 *a.* Human trophy head displayed on a pole with a shield and an *atlatl.* Codex Selden II (1964: 6). *b.* Lord 5 Flower with a severed head at his belt. Fonds Mexicains 20, Aubin Collection (after Nowotny 1961: Pl. 51).

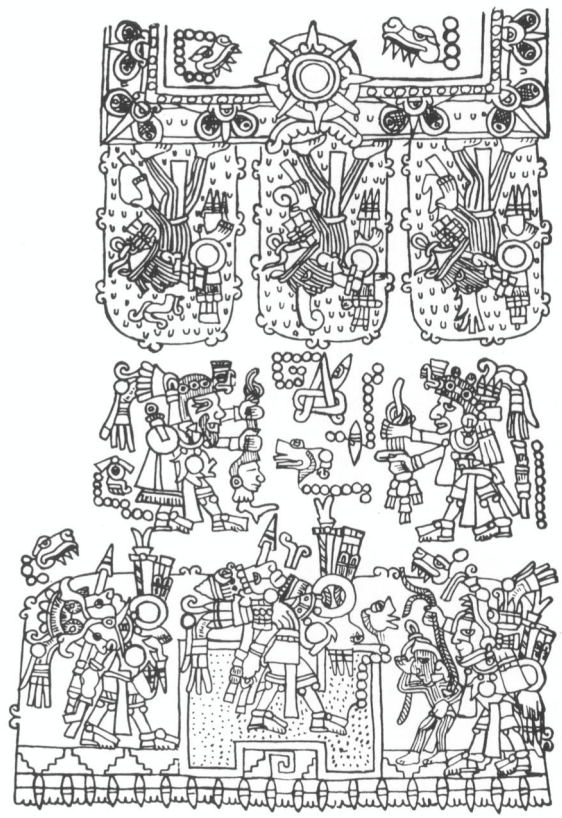


Fig. 51 Lord 10 Tlaloc holding a decapitated head. Codex Nuttall, p. 21.

harvest ceremony. Male agro-fertility deities that can be linked with severed heads include Xipe Totec, Patecatl, and Centeotl.

Severed heads are also directly related to major lunar and stellar cosmogony and cosmology. The fertility-earth complex surrounding Toci is tightly linked to this ritual form of sacrifice within this religious realm by means of the lunar aspects of Toci and Xochiquetzal. Male gods that belong to the lunar-stellar complex and that can be linked to severed heads include Quetzalcoatl, Xolotl, and Mixcoatl. The severed heads themselves may have represented the celestial stars in general as the spirit eyes of dead warriors residing in the heavens. The Bat God Tlacatzinacantli, the Opossum God, and probably the Merchant Gods are likewise linked to the night sky and the shifting patterns of the stars and constellations during the annual seasons. Viewing the ceremonial nature of the ballgame as a ritual portrayal of the sky passage of the Sun and Moon, Night and Day, or of the lunar phases clearly explains why severed heads are frequently associated with ballcourts in the codices and stone reliefs. On page 21 of the Codex Nuttall (Fig. 51) a most complex scene shows Lord 10 Tlaloc holding a severed head. Below, Lord 10 Wind, with a head mask of Itztapal Totec, stands in a ballcourt holding a gladiatorial stone and *atlatl* darts. All of the personages wear the fire disk on their chests like that worn by the decapitated goddess I have suggested may be Ilamatecuhtli-Tonan (Fig. 35*c*). Seler interprets page 21 of the Nuttall as commemorating a calendric correction of the Venus period because of abnormalities inherent in the annual cycle of that planet.

I have provided Table III in an attempt to sort out those gods and goddesses I have associated in one manner or another with ritual decapitation and trophy heads and to aid the reader in understanding their multiple aspects. This is not a complete chart of the Mexican pantheon, nor is it a genetic chart, but one roughly based on the different mythical aspects or realms attributed to those gods.

Thus, from all of the foregoing discussion it appears that there were at least seven different major aspects of the pre-Columbian head complex. 1) The most obvious and best described is that of displaying the flayed and unflayed heads of sacrificed war captives or slaves on pole racks, the *tzompantli*. 2) Severed heads of women impersonators of the goddess Ilamatecuhtli and of male gladiator victims slain during the ceremonies in honor of Xipe were carried by the lead priests in ritual dances. 3) Sacrifice of women impersonating Teteoinnan-Toci and Xilonen was by ritual decapitation, probably with combined agricultural and lunar associations. As far as is discernible from Sahagún and other sources, in all other instances heart sacrifice or gladiatorial sacrifice occurred before the

head was severed and either used in a dance or added to the *tzompantli.* 4) Heads appear to have been skinned and tanned or shrunk, as described by Motolinía and Córdova, probably for much the same reason that trophy heads or skulls were kept. It is likely that shrunken heads were displayed or worn as part of the garments or vestments of important personages, especially among the Zapotecs of Oaxaca and the southern Maya. 5) Trophy heads were avidly taken in battle, especially by the Huastecans and the peoples of the West Coast, and skulls were carved, plastered, painted, and covered with mosaic as personal trophies kept by individuals. Often they were buried with them as a mark of achieved status and power obtained through outstanding victories over opponents in war or for positions of power and authority within the hierarchy. In this case the head or skull of a predecessor may have symbolized the actual transmission of authority as well as honored the former priest or lord. 6) Severed heads represented the stars of the night sky and for this reason may be associated with the lunar-stellar deities and the ballgame. 7) Finally, severed heads or facial skins were often attached to the exteriors of burial bundles, at least during the Post-Classic and possibly earlier. Though the codical representations are conventionally interpreted as stone or wooden masks, I feel they are within the style or usual range of depicting severed, possibly shrunken, heads. Presumably they were the head or skin of the dead personage represented, but they could have represented trophy heads in his possession.

In conclusion, the evidence offered here alone indicates that ritual decapitation, the taking of trophy heads, severed heads, and ceremonial cannibalism constituted a far more important and pan-Mesoamerican trait than was previously recognized. It was most assuredly more than a simple component of the Tlacaxipehualiztli complex, as Acosta Saignes (1950) implied, or of the ballgame complex as Knauth (1961) described it.

Ethnohistory and archaeology, in the service of anthropology, are concerned with the nature and position of unique events in space and time. At this level, as employed in this research paper, efforts are confined almost exclusively to the descriptive level of cultural-historic integration. The ultimate purpose of such research is, hopefully, the discovery of regularities that are general and explanatory in nature (see Willey and Phillips 1958: 2-5). Briefly, I have followed herein what philosophers of science have termed the empiricist or narrow inductivist approach which Hempel (1966: 11) has described as: ". . . (1) observation and recording of all facts, (2) analysis and classification of these facts, (3) inductive derivations of generalizations from them, and (4) further testing of the generalizations." Because of the nature of the data available and the limits inherent in a library research paper of this sort, the fourth step in the process is notably lacking here. The foregoing conclusions do little more than offer a classification and style analysis of one Mesoamerican culture trait with the purpose of demonstrating that this trait was more complex, more ancient, and more widespread than previously recognized. However, two implicit generalizations have been alluded to as well. In the opening paragraphs, in an attempt to limit the scope of this study to ancient Mesoamerica, I utilized Goldenweiser's concept of "limited possibilities" (1933: 45-9) to dismiss arguments that recent diffusion accounts for the nearly worldwide practices of decapitation and ceremonial cannibalism as a social means to ritualize or effect the belief that the victim's energies, mystical or physical, could be transferred to his conqueror or the conqueror's group. This idea that the head, heart, thigh, and other muscle parts of the human body contain the seat or locus of certain physical/psychic powers is assumed to occur in a worldwide distribution among primitive peoples. This universality is explained by further assuming that several distinct and independent processes of logical thought were carried out to similar conclusions because of the

basic observable physical limitations and capabilities of the human body, its structure, needs, and functions. Among these cultures it is deemed natural that the center of mental capabilities lies in the brain and head, that they associate life powers (or soul) with the heart and physical excellence with the strong forearm or swift leg muscle. It is implied that this also explains or at least typifies the occurrence of this belief in ancient Mesoamerica. We must also consider the possibility that human decapitation developed, independently or otherwise, as a trait of the Paleolithic Old World cultures and may have been carried into the American hemisphere as a trait of the Archaic substratum that underlies Mesoamerican cultures. Independent development, then, is not so much the answer as is the role that decapitation plays within distinct New World cultural systems. Naturally this involves the view that we can abstract from cultural products (i.e., artifacts, art styles, and descriptive accounts) the normative concepts existent in the minds of men now dead and that through ethnological inference and analogy we can test, or at least substantiate, these interpretations. This pushes beyond simple culture history and into the realm of paleo-psychology or psychological reductionism—a realm that the cultural ecologists and "new" archaeologists feel is impossible to test with the evidence available to these disciplines.

The other proposal is presented in the first paragraph of the conclusions where it is suggested that, during the Post-Classic at least, population density may have been a major stress factor leading to such seemingly maladaptive or dysfunctional activities as warfare and mass sacrifice. Warfare and sacrifice may have effectively functioned to lower the breeding population, while wars of expansion and conquest increased the input of tribute goods. Here decapitation, head trophies, ritual cannibalism, and other coup-like practices are thought to have functioned to reinforce group cohesion and to raise the level of individual need for achievement within the society or special sub-group where the possession and display of coup insignia provided a positive status-incurring drive. To investigate and test this hypothesis, several studies beyond the scope of this paper would have to be carried out to determine the empirical role of warfare and the reinforcing attributes of coup practices among preindustrial agricultural societies.

Processualists, i.e., those theorists stressing hypothetico-deductive research methodology and models to explain cultural processes, tend to single out the geographic environment and demographic characteristics of a cultural system as ecological causative variables that are held to be explanatory of the things and events to be explained. Flannery (1967: 122) has noted that "in terms of the philosophy of science, I believe the process approach results in moving 'decisions' about cultural behavior even farther away from the individual." Yet as Kushner (1970: 131) comments, ". . . even if it is admittedly difficult enough to ascertain motivation in living human beings, ought this factor to be utterly ignored in archaeological theory because it is an empirically difficult phenomenon to locate in the archaeological record?" I think not, and it is hoped that further research and thought along these lines will increase our understanding of the role of human ritual decapitation and severed heads in pre-Hispanic social character, cosmogony, and cosmology.

Plate I Xipe figure with a ball and a severed head. Urn no. 1, Tomb 58, Monte Albán, Oaxaca. Photograph courtesy of I.N.A.H./Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico.

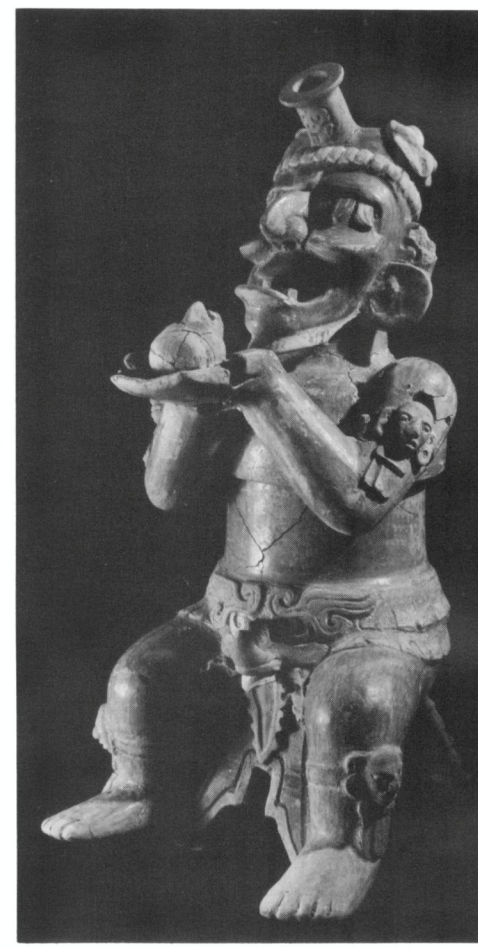
Plate II Xipe with a staff and a severed head. Vessel no. 15, Tomb 103, Monte Albán, Oaxaca. Photograph by Milosh Trnka, courtesy of I.N.A.H./Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico.

Plate III Classic Zapotec serpent-masked figure with a head suspended hair down from his necklace. Tlacochahuaya, Oaxaca (Caso and Bernal 1952: Fig. 284).

Plate IV Standing male figure wearing a severed head suspended hair down from his necklace or belt. Provenience Mitla. Epoch III-B. Height 28½ inches. Photograph courtesy of the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, New York.

Plate V Classic figurine with a trophy head suspended hair down from his necklace. From near Comitán and La Libertad, Chiapas. Photograph courtesy of the American Museum of Natural History, New York.

b



a

Plate VIa and b Polychrome two-part effigy figure. Burial 10, Tikal, Guatemala. Height 36 cm. This may represent the god Itzamná receiving a severed head as an offering. Tzakol, Early Classic Period. Photograph courtesy of the Tikal Project, the University Museum, Philadelphia.

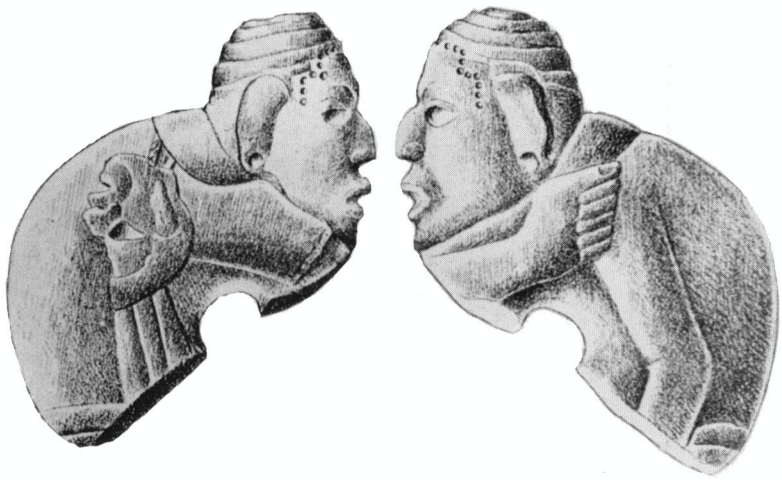


Plate VII Undated, possibly Late Classic, stone figure from Comitán with a human trophy head suspended by a cord (Seler 1901: Abb. 278).

Plate VIII Classic Maya standing figurine with a skull suspended from a bead collar and two heads suspended hair down from his belt (one is missing). From Isla de Jaina, Campeche. Carrillo Gil Collection, Mexico City (Gamboa 1963: 169).

Plate IX Four stone statues with trophy heads suspended from their collars: *a.* From Hacienda Chaculá, Guatemala; *b-d.* From Pueblo Viejo Quen Santo, Guatemala (Seler 1901: Abb. 78, 140, 141, 177).

Plate X Two stone jaguar figures from Cave I, Quen Santo, Guatemala (Seler 1901: Abb. 218, 219).

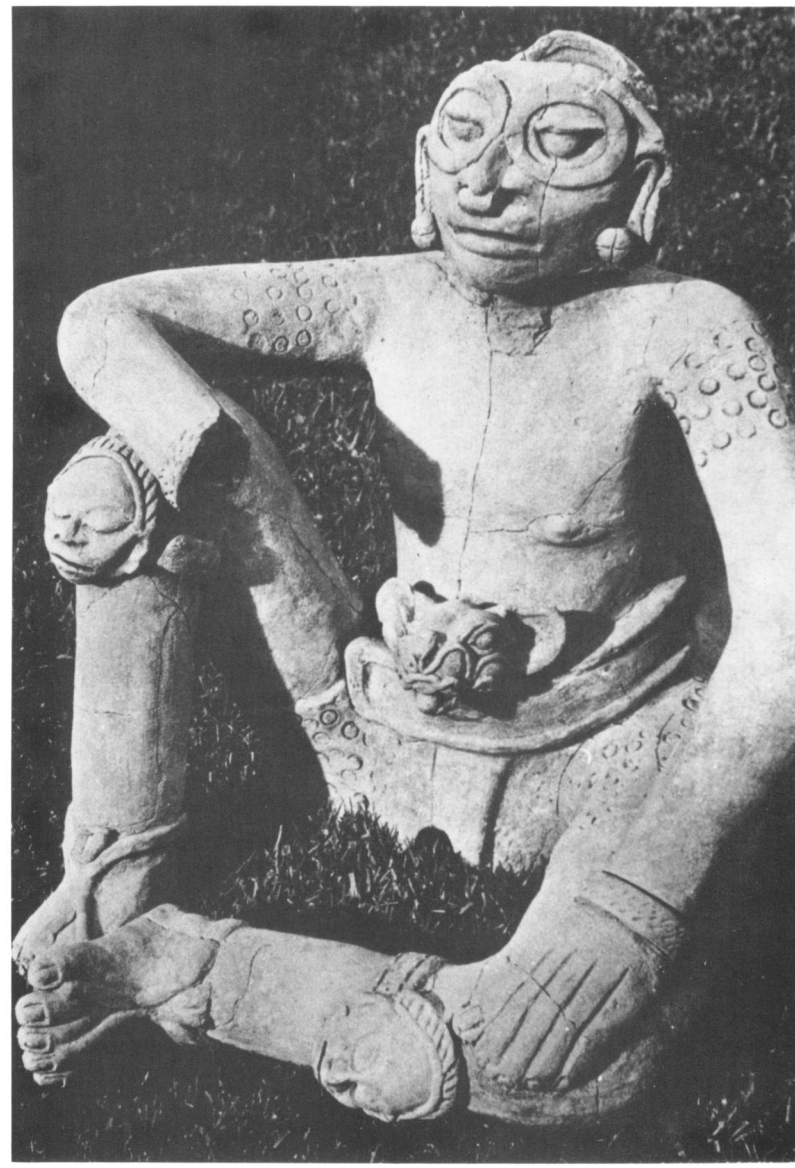


Plate XI Seated ball player with Tlaloc-style eyes and facial skin knee pads, Totonac culture (Caso and Gutiérrez 1965: 125).

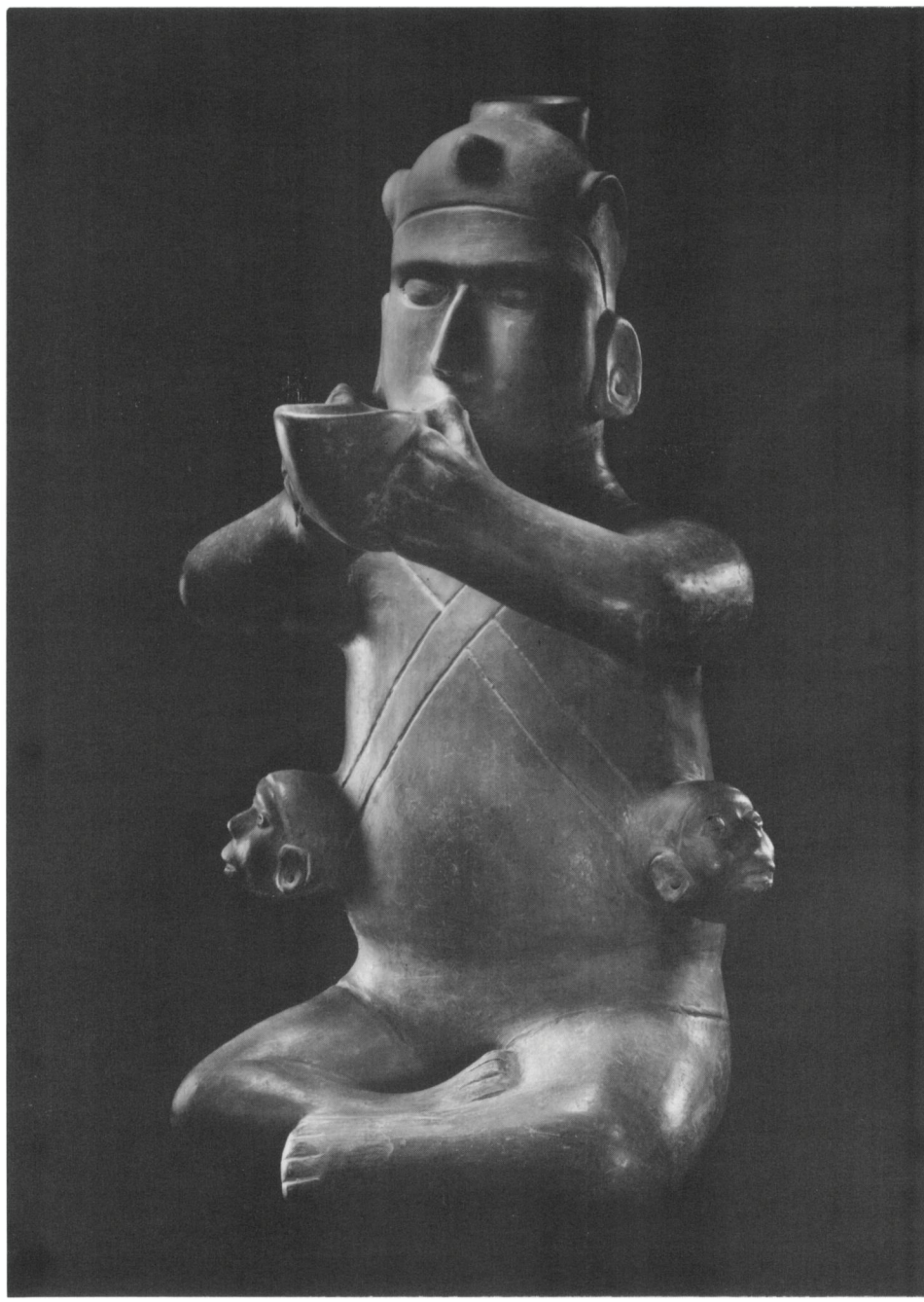


Plate XII Colima human effigy jar with trophy heads suspended by crossed shoulder straps. Photograph courtesy of the Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin.

Plate XIII Colima human effigy jar with trophy heads suspended by crossed shoulder straps (von Winning and Stendahl 1968: Pl. 71).

Plate XIV Mixtec polychrome tripod *olla* from Nochixtlan, Oaxaca. The Wind God, Ehecatl, offers a human head to Cipactli. Photograph by the author.

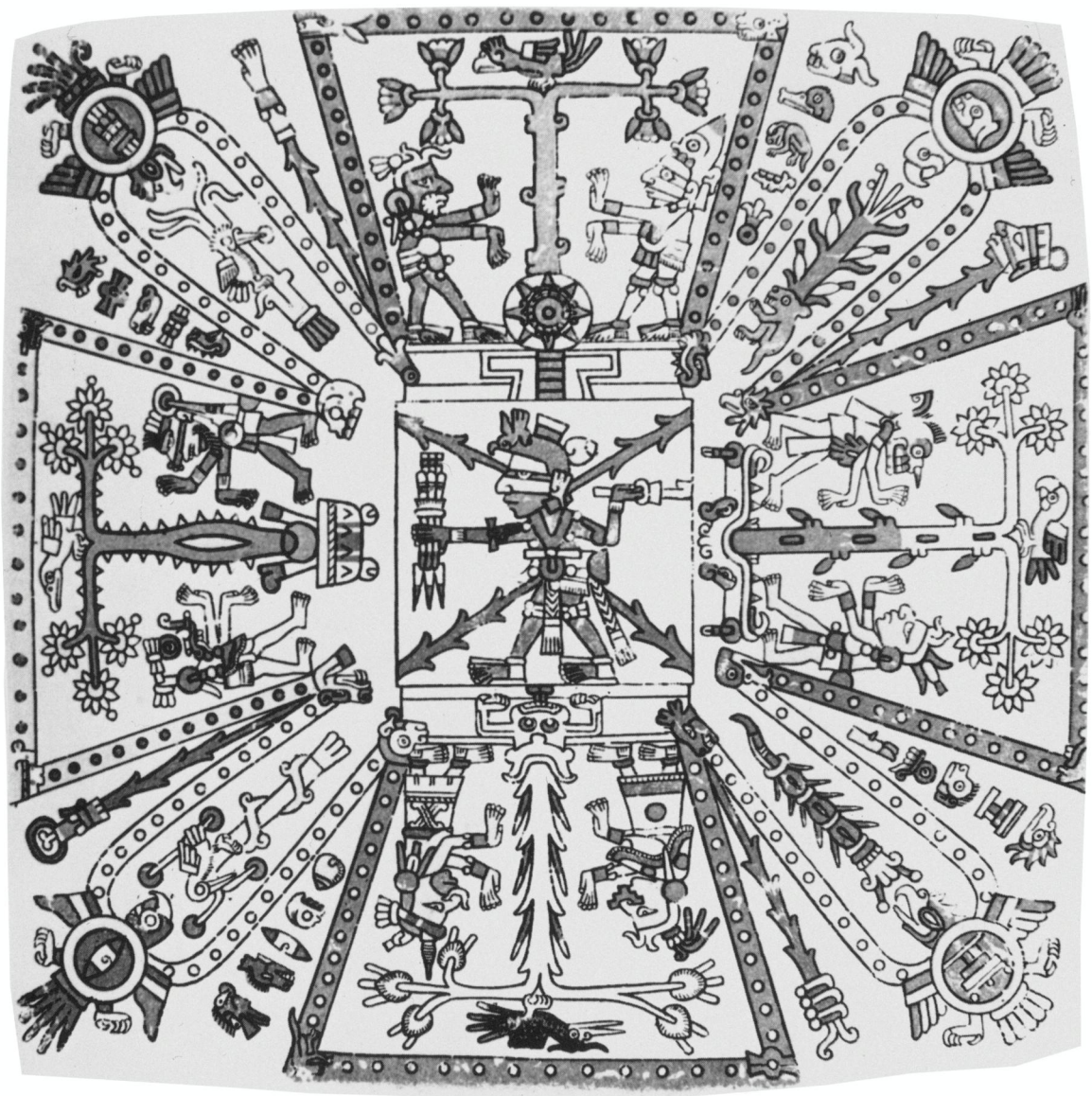


Plate XV The Four Directions of the World with the severed head (top right) and mutilated body parts of Xipe between the four divisions of the world. Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, p. 1.

Plate XVI Seated ceramic figurine with a trophy head, possibly shrunken, suspended at the waist by a shoulder strap. The style is similar to those of southern Oaxaca, but the provenience is unknown. Museo Frissell, Mitla, Oaxaca. Photograph by the author.

Table I

Annual Veintena Ceremonies and Ritual Decapitation: Summary[1]

Nahuatl Name	*Order*	*Period* (1519-20)	*Deity*	*Ritual Form of Decapitation, etc.*
Tlacaxipe-hualiztli	2nd	III:6-III:25	Xipe Totec	Gladiatorial sacrifice; severed head dance; heads put on skull rack at Yopico temple
Toxcatl	5th	V:5-V:24	Tezcatlipoca	Heads put on *tzompantli* after heart sacrifice
Hueytecuilhuitl	8th	VII:4-VII:23	Xilonen	Woman impersonator of Xilonen sacrificed by decapitation while held on the back of a priest
Xocotlhuetzi	10th	VIII:13-IX:1	Xiuhtecuhtli Yacatecuhtli	Following burning and heart sacrifice, heads severed and hung on *tzompantli* at Temple of Yacatecuhtli
Ochpaniztli	11th	IX:2-IX:21	Teteoinnan-Toci Tlazolteotl	Sacrifice of impersonating woman by decapitation; later head placed on *tzompantli*
Teotleco or Pachtontli	12th	IX:22-X:11	"All Gods" Tezcatlipoca Huitzilopochtli Yacatecuhtli	Fire sacrifice to Xiuhtecuhtli and Yacatecuhtli; severed heads placed on *tzompantli* (Note: Bat God, Tlacatzinacantli, associated with acts of decapitation here)
Tepeilhuitl	13th	X:12-X:31	Tlaloc Tlaloques	Four women (Tepexoch, Xochtecatl, Matlalcueie, Mayahuel) and one man (Milnauatl) sacrificed on Temple of Tlalco, then heads put on *tzompantli*
Quecholli	14th	XI:1-XI:20	Mixcoatl Tlamatzincatl	Severed heads of victims hung on *tzompantli* at temple of Mixcoatl
Panquetzaliztli	15th	XI:21-XII:10	Huitzilopochtli Tezcatlipoca	Gladiatorial sacrifice in main ball-court; severed heads hung on Great Skull Rack
Tititl	17th	XII:31-I:19	Ilamatecuhtli	Impersonator of goddess sacrificed and decapitated; head carried in dance by priest

[1]Based primarily on Sahagún's detailed Nahuatl accounts in his Book 2 (1950-70, III) and on Table IV in Nicholson (1971). This table is limited to those ceremonies where aspects of ritual decapitation occur. It is, therefore, somewhat artificial and schematic but should convey the core of these rituals as they were practiced in Highland Central Mexico at Contact, as typified by Tenochtitlan and Tetzcoco.

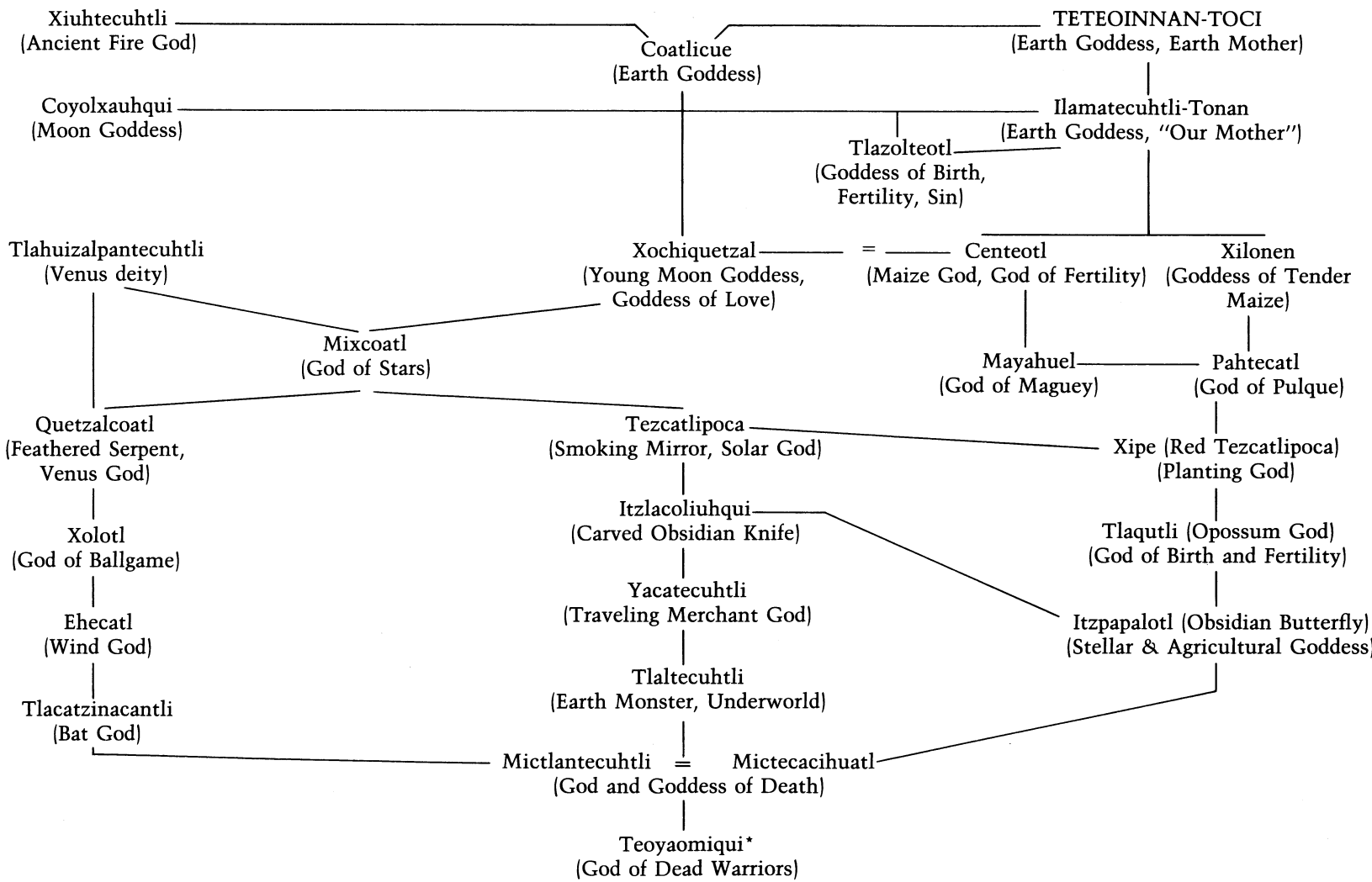
Table II
Distribution of Examples Cited

Location	*Formative*	*Classic*	*Post-Classic*	*Contact*
MEXICO				
West Coast				Relación de Compostela
Colima			Effigy jars: trophy heads	
Jalisco			Tizapan El Alto: Burials 12,26,37	Santarén on the Acaxee
Central Highlands				
Teotihuacán		Xolalpan: heads between bowls		
Xochicalco			Skull trophy: cut	
Tula			Stone *tzompantli?*	
Tenochtitlan-Tlaltelolco			Tlaltelolco: *tzompantli* excavated	Descriptions by Motolinía, Díaz, Durán, Sahagún, and others
			Codical references	
Oaxaca Valley	Monte Albán II	Monte Albán III	Lambityeco figurines	
	Mound J glyphs	Tombs 58, 103: Xipe urns	San Luis Beltran: skulls in pots	Córdova's Zapotec Vocabulario
		Tlacochahuaya urn	Tehuántepec: figurines of head ceremony	
Gulf Coast				
San Lorenzo	7 Colossal heads			
La Venta	4 Colossal heads			
	Stela 3: right figure with trophy head			
Tres Zapotes	2 Colossal heads			
	Stela A: right figure holds severed head			
Cerro de las Mesas			Trench 40: ca. 50 heads in pots	
Aparicio		Decapitated ballplayer		
Coatepec		Eagle warrior with severed head		Sahagún on the Toveiome and the Huastecans in war: severed heads
El Tajín		Ballcourt panels		
Chiapas Maya				
Izapa	Stela 21: decapitation			
El Jobo (Guatemala border)	Stela 1: severed head, decapitation			
Yaxchilán		Lintel 12: wears head on chest		
		Lintel 9: necklace of five heads		
Comitán		La Libertad figurine: trophy head on chest	See Guatemala: Quen Santo and Hacienda Chaculá	

Palenque Bonampak		Seler's stone figure: trophy head suspended by cord Tablets of the Palace and the Slaves: trophy head offerings Murals: heads in headdresses and on necklaces		
Yucatán Maya Jaina Cemetery		Figurine: skull on chest, heads at belt		
Chichén Itzá			Ballcourt panels Reliefs in North Temple of ballcourt Cenote skull Torso with heads on necklace	Landa's account of the treatment of heads of the Cocom lords
Santa Rita, Belize			Murals: decapitated heads	
GUATEMALA Uaxactún	Burial 12: facial part of skull removed Cists 4, 6: severed heads between bowls			
Tikal	Burial 85: head and thigh bone removed	Burial 48: head, hands, and feet removed Burial 10: Old God vessel Altar 5		
Nebaj		Burial 4: 12 skulls, severed		
Chukumuk		Approx. 8 decapitated burials		
Kaminaljuyú		Tombs A-III, A-V: skulls of severed heads Tomb B-IV: carved trophy skull		
Santa Lucía Cotzumalhuapa		Monuments 1,3,4,21: decapitation, severed heads		
Hacienda Chaculá			Stone figure: upside down headlets	
Quen Santo			Three stone statues: heads suspended from collars Two jaguar stone statues: heads suspended from collars and on chests	
CENTRAL AMERICA El Salvador Tazumal			Decapitated human effigy	
Mexicanus			Figurine with trophy head	
Honduras Ulua Valley			Trophy heads on jar: carried and worn	Oviedo on Xipe rites, decapitation, etc. in Panamá and Honduras

Table III

Interrelationship of Pre-Columbian Deities Related to Ritual Decapitation



* Huahuantli is the Stripped Teoyaomiqui

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